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Week of May 28, 2007

NBA

How to wreck
a good series

NFL

A return man's
short shelf life



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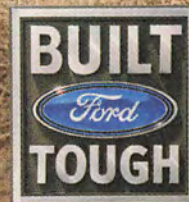
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THIS WEEK

COVER STORY > **BASEBALL**

16 Going ... going ... gone!

First there was Ruth, then Aaron, now Bonds. With sports' most hallowed record on the verge of changing hands, **SPORTING NEWS** considers all things related to and revolving around hitting a baseball very, very far.

18 The spark is missing There's little electricity surrounding Barry Bonds' march to 756. A lot of the blame lies with baseball's power overload.

By Sean Deveney

20 From the HR department Fans and members at **SportingNews.com** take their hacks at a series of home run-related questions.

21 Bonds' place in history is secure* Unless someone produces the goods on Barry. Then it will be time to invoke the 'A' word. *By Stan McNeal*

22 Bash by bash SN's take on some of history's biggest home runs as they happened.

24 The long and, well, long of it Harmon Killebrew, Ken Griffey and Frank Thomas chat about the four-bagger. *By Ryan Fagan and Stan McNeal*

26 The next big-hitting things You know about A-Rod, Pujols and Cabrera, but what about the younger wave of power hitters? *By Ryan Fagan*

27 Sizing up the sluggers Babe Ruth stood out not just for his bat but also for his size. Today's top sluggers, though, are all huge.

> **NBA PLAYOFFS**

36 Stern, baby, Stern

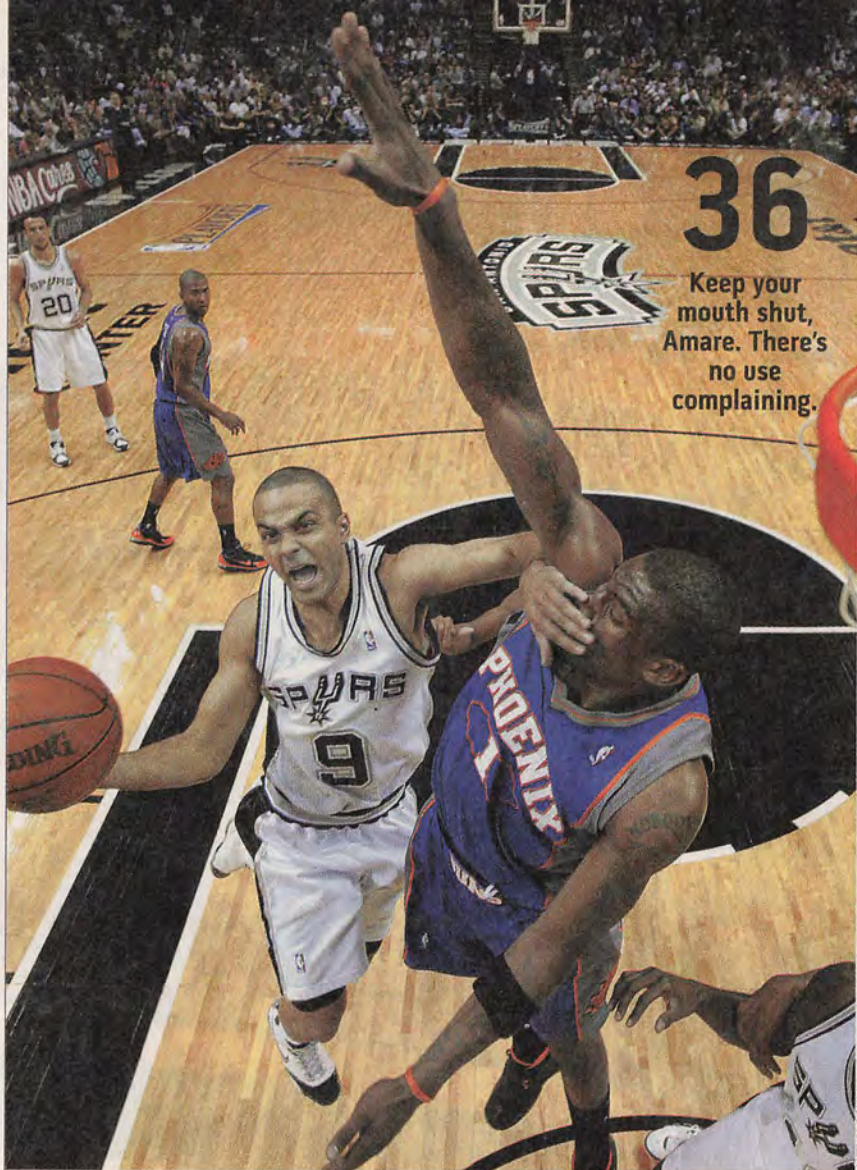
When he extinguished the Suns' title chances on a technicality, the commissioner may have torched his league's popularity. *By Sean Deveney*

> **NFL**

48 Diminishing returns

Players who excel at running back kicks are electrifying performers, but it usually doesn't take long for them to lose their juice. *By Michael Bradley*

Send your editorial comments
to Senior VP/Editorial Director John Rawlings
at jrawlings@sportingnews.com.



36

Keep your mouth shut, Amare. There's no use complaining.

KNOW IT ALL

- 6 To Know List** Are the Yankees playoff-bound? Will the Pats own 2007? Will the Irish win big? What's the deal with all these questions?
- 8 On Deck** Gentlemen—and Danica—start your engines. Plus, **Bob Hille's Starting 5**.
- 10 Your Turn** Suns fans are, well, ticked.
- 11 My Turn** Sean Deveney says if you can't say something nice, just scribble it.
- 12 The Biz** It seems Sidney Crosby carries a fair amount of clout on and off the ice.
- 15 NHL awards** Speaking of Sidney ...

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- 56** **EXPOSURE**

COVER: BONDS BY BYRON HETZLER / USP / ZUMA PRESS;
AARON BY TONY TOMSIC / MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES;
RODRIGUEZ BY JOHN DUNN FOR SN

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This week on SportingNews .COM

/NASCAR/

Round and round

There's a good reason **Jimmie Johnson** is a perennial favorite to take the Coca-Cola 600: He has won the race three of the past four years and has five career victories at Lowe's Motor Speedway. Will he make it six? Matt Crossman will be blogging on the race; go to sportingnews.com/experts/matt-crossman.



HAROLD HINSON FOR SN

/FANTASY BASEBALL/

The next studs

Get the early scoop on up-and-coming guys such as Giants righthander **Tim Lincecum**; our Fantasy Source experts scout major league prospects every Monday. Go to fantasygames.sportingnews.com/baseball.



JEFF CHIU / AP

How's your team doing?

Keep up with player injuries and find out who's hot (or not) with our round-the-clock customizable player updates. Go to fantasybaseball.sportingnews.com/baseball.

/NHL/ Who will hoist the Cup?

Finally, the Stanley Cup finals are here. Kara Yorio will preview the series in her blog at sportingnews.com/experts/kara-yorio.

/MEMBERS/

Five-star profile

★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Username: thewho52
Member since: September 2002
Hometown: Cottage Grove, Minn.

Favorite teams: It's all Minnesota. Twins, Vikings, Wild, Timberwolves and Golden Gophers.

On the Twins' struggles: "How many more negatives can the Twins endure before the hole becomes too deep? How long before they start the shakeup that rights the ship? With quality pitching prospects at Triple-A, you'd think that would be a good place to start."

On what the Wild needs to do this offseason: "The Wild needs one more big goal-scoring center who can't be pushed around in front of the opposing goal and one more big defenseman who can clear people out in front of our goal. Of course, that's what everyone wants."

On soccer: "In Minnesota, we use this to keep our legs in shape for hockey."

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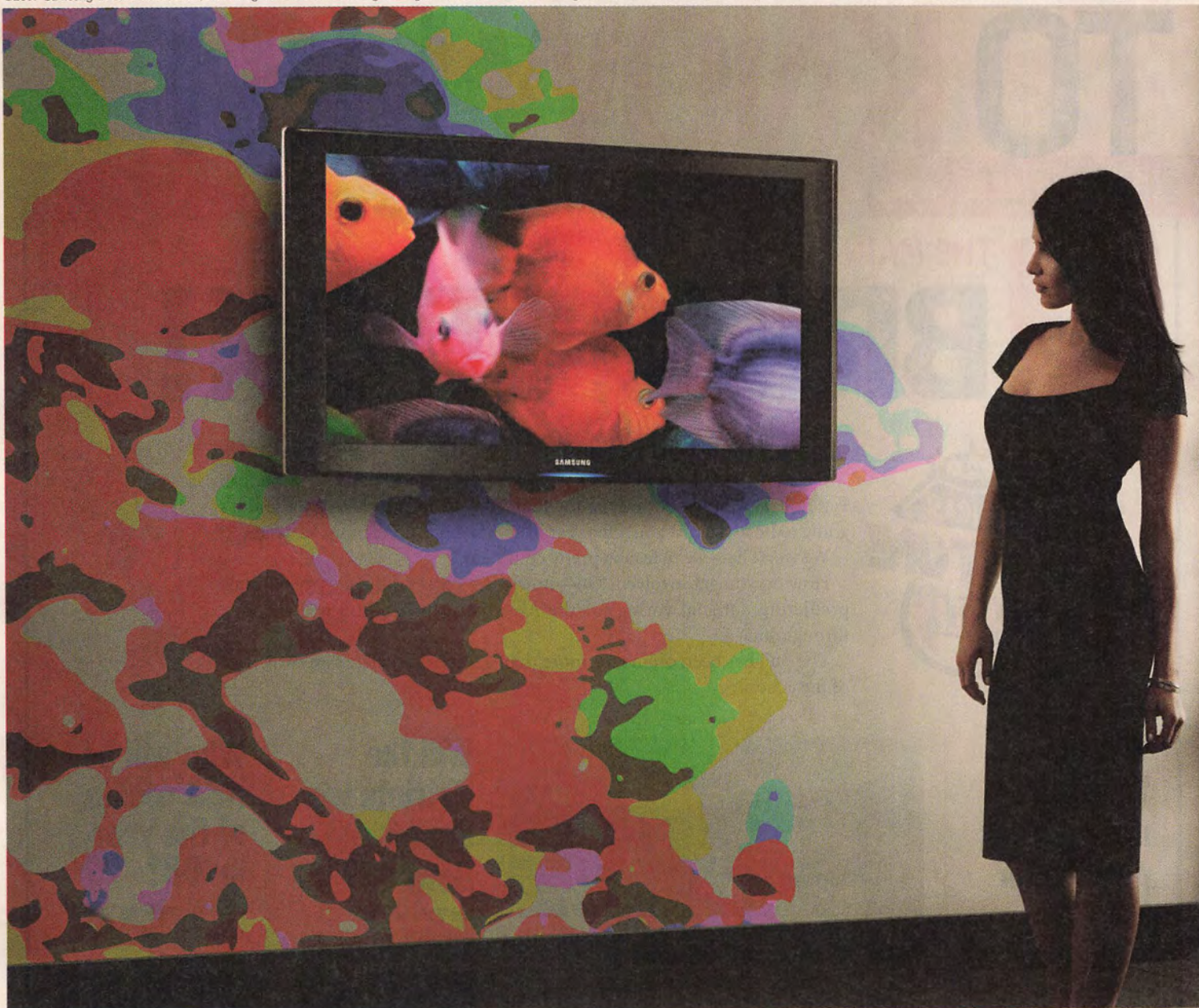
S))) Tuning in

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TO KNOW LIST

6 things to make you an **INSTANT EXPERT** this week

1 THE MAIN EVENT **BRING IT ON!**



You think you're better than us?

Over the next 12 months, we'll see who's got the goods. The All-American Fan Poll is coming your way in the June 18 issue of *SPORTING NEWS*, and it's going to be us against you. One year in sports—our predictions vs. yours.

We won't lie—we're feeling pretty confident.

How do you get involved? Go—now!—to sportingnews.com and start predicting. Official voting for the All-American Fan Poll will be open through June 4.

The poll has been online for more than a week now. Here's an early taste of the action:

Will the Yankees make the playoffs for the 12th straight year?

Us: 61% say **NO!**

You: 67% say **NO!**



JOHN DUNN FOR SN



MICHAEL MCNAMARA / SN ARCHIVES

How many games will Notre Dame win?

Us: 48% say 7 or fewer **You:** 64% say 8 or 9



ALAN MARLER FOR SN

Who will win the Chase for the NASCAR Nextel Cup?

Us: 68% say Jeff Gordon **You:** 50% say Gordo, too

Will the Patriots win Super Bowl 42?

Us: 71% say **NO!**

You: 64% say **NO!**



BOB LEVERONE / SN

Who will be NBA rookie of the year in '08?

Us: 45% say Greg Oden

You: 43% say

Kevin Durant



JAY DROWNS / SN

2 YOU HEARD IT HERE

'The shelf life of an NFL return man is not long. We're talking fresh produce, not canned goods.'

—See story on page 48



Bad news, Devin Hester.

3 IN THE SPOTLIGHT: COLLEGE HOOPS COACHES

Money men

Parts of Florida are afflicted by a drought that has lasted 18 months, but officials at the University of Florida are making it rain for Billy Donovan.

Florida is working toward a contract extension that likely will make Donovan the highest-paid coach in Division I basketball. He is expected to make an average of \$3.5 million annually over the life of the contract, which would end in 2014.

He's not the only coach enjoying a spring deluge of guaranteed money:

■ New Kentucky coach Billy Gillispie signed a seven-year contract worth \$2.3 million per year.

■ Louisville's Rick Pitino received a three-year extension and a raise to an average of \$2.25 million guaranteed, plus loyalty bonuses of \$1.75 million in July and \$3.6 million in 2010 and 2013.

■ North Carolina's Roy Williams got a four-year extension that elevates his guaranteed salary to \$2.6 million.

■ Texas' Rick Barnes became the first \$2 million basketball coach in the Big 12 when his contract was extended an extra two years, to the end of the 2016-17 season. —Mike DeCourcy



Don't hide it all under your mattress, Billy.

4 REMEMBER THE NAMES

Byron Westbrook

You know his big bro—Brian Westbrook, star running back for the Eagles. Byron probably isn't Ronde to Brian's Tiki, but the former Division III player has caught the eye of Redskins coaches as a cornerback and special teams prospect. Westbrook looked fast and aggressive in rookie camp, and coach Joe Gibbs loves long shots.

Jesse Pellot-Rosa Sound familiar? Pellot-Rosa was one of the stars of the VCU basketball team that toppled Duke and nearly took down Pittsburgh in this year's NCAA Tournament. Now he's in camp with the Jets as a wide receiver. Pellot-Rosa hasn't played football since high school, but he's a 6-4 jumping jack with a work ethic that has Jets insiders talking. You never know.

It's plain to see that Pellot-Rosa knows how to go up for a ball in traffic.



5 TELEVISION

Upfront and center



FNL viewers know this is one show that deserved to stick around.

The Selection Sunday of the TV world is upfront week in May, when networks unveil their schedules for the upcoming year. Last week, NBC announced that critically acclaimed yet low-rated high school football drama *Friday Night Lights* will return for a second season (and move, appropriately enough, to Friday nights at 10 ET). But the bubble burst for another football drama, *Football Wives*. The ABC show, based on an extremely over-the-top BBC soap opera, centered on the lives of NFL players and their significant others. Supposedly, it was cut from the schedule because of cost concerns, but it couldn't have helped that ABC parent company Disney owns the broadcast rights for NFL games on ESPN.

In other upfront news, ESPN is planning to launch a *Real Sports*-esque news magazine program called *ESPN Reports*. The show will feature popular columnist Bill Simmons and is slated to debut in mid-October. And, about six months ahead of schedule, FOX announced that *House*, a popular medical show, has been awarded the coveted post-Super Bowl spot. —Tricia Garner

6 IT BEARS REPEATING

'The easiest predictor of future behavior is previous behavior.'

—Dolphins coach Cam Cameron, apparently not a big believer in Ricky Williams' chances on the comeback trail

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>>>>> The week ahead in sports

THIS I GOTTA SEE

All times Eastern

PICK of the WEEK

SUN 27 Indy 500

(1 p.m., ABC). I'm boldly predicting this is the year **Danica Patrick** wins the whole dang thing, partly because I sense something special in the air, partly because, at this moment, I can't name another Indy driver.



AP/WIDE WORLD

SAT 26 NBA's Greatest Games: Pistons-Celtics

(1 p.m., ESPN Classic). C's fans can revisit a much happier time—1987—when a little parquet playoff magic played out in the form of a steal by Bird and a layup by D.J.

TUE 29 Giants at Mets (7 p.m., ESPN)

San Fran rolls into the Big Apple, but don't get too excited—a certain age-defying left fielder isn't going to play. You *do* know Moises Alou is on the D.L., don't you?

THU 31 NFL Classics: Bills-Oilers (8 p.m., NFL Network)

When the Oilers stormed to a 35-3 lead in their 1993 wild-card game against the Bills, Houston fans were praising the run-and-shoot. When their team had a wee bit of trouble salting away the game, they were calling it the run-and-*\$\$@#&*. —*Kyle Veltrop*

COMING AT YOU

In the June 4 issue

Tom terrific. At 41, Tom Glavine is having as much fun as he did when he was 21, and not only because he's about to become a 300-game winner. He's also as good as ever. There was a time when many fans felt umpires made life easy for Glavine, calling strikes on pitches that clearly were outside. No more. As MLB Insider Stan McNeal will explain, Glavine has been forced to reinvent himself—he's challenging hitters on the inside part of the plate with astonishing success. He'll get to 300, probably this season. The question is: Will any other pitcher in the game today get there, too?

BOB HILLE'S STARTING

5

1 The NBA.

Wow, you think the league's embarrassed by the pre-playoffs MVP vote? How 'bout the sixth man award? If you're a Spurs fan, you're thinking David Stern now, right?

2 Michael Vick.

OK, are you surprised by this dog thing? After all, isn't Vick the one who taught the Falcons to roll over and play dead?

3 World Series.

It'll start on Wednesday to keep it off TV on Friday. Great, the one night my parents let me stay up late enough to watch the first three innings ...

4 Minicamps.

So I haven't kept up. Did Favre end up in or out? At one point I heard the Packers were considering putting him on the mentally unable to perform list.

5 756. Should Bud be

there, should Bud not be there? Honestly, isn't it time the commissioner just show a little testosterone? Or—help me out, players—would HGH be a better choice?

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YOUR TURN

You rant, we listen. Send e-mails to yourtturn@sportingnews.com.

David Stern, you just became Public Enemy No. 1 in Phoenix. —enigmatics101 via SportingNews.com



ERIC GAY / AP

Don't expect Robert Horry's jersey to be a hot seller in Phoenix anytime soon.

■ I enjoyed the "Best by Number" feature (SN, May 14)—it's a fun topic to debate. However, the exclusion of Brian Westbrook at No. 36 puzzled me. Rasheed Wallace is a fine player, but I can't believe that Westbrook was not even listed as a contender! —Francis Warner, Los Angeles

■ I'm confused how you can have Marcus Stroud ranked as the top defensive tackle in the AFC when he's not even worth

done the past five years? —Owen Howard, Iowa

■ Not mentioning Nicklas Lidstrom at No. 5 in your rankings is embarrassing. —Matthew Cohn, Princeton, N.J.

■ I don't know if I can live in a sports world where Ladell Betts is "worth mentioning" and Reggie Bush and Deuce McAllister are not. —Kemmler Chapple, Hammond, La.

mentioning at No. 99 a few pages earlier. Are you saying So Taguchi is a better baseball player than Stroud is a football player? I demand a recount. —Marcus Blackwell, Moreno Valley, Calif.

■ You have a list of the greatest athletes by number and you include NASCAR drivers? Are they secretly running alongside the car? —Mark Olson, Janesville, Wis.

■ Are you kidding? Jason Kidd is not even mentioned at all? I mean, seriously—what has Nomar Garciaparra

POLLING PLACE

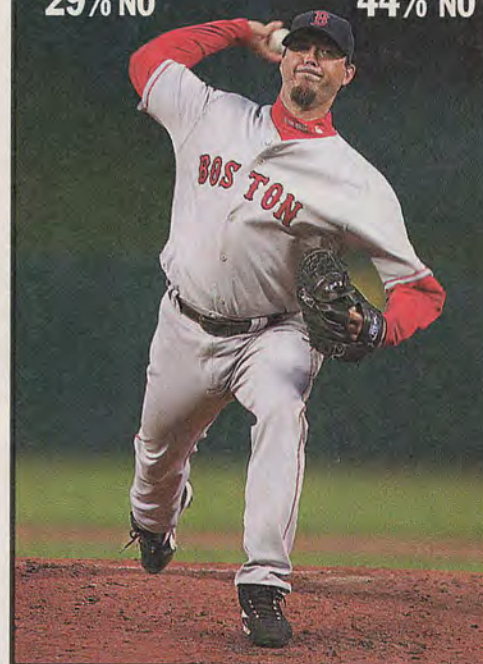
Seven down, 13 to go—will Josh Beckett get to 20 wins?

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STAFF

71% YES
29% NO

56% YES
44% NO



ALBERT DICKSON / SN

RADIO★STAR

Real talk from a fan on Sporting News Radio

'Michael Vick has had a history of off-the-field issues. The fact that he's in the middle of another one is more disturbing than it is surprising, but it also represents a new low for him.' —Jeff in Indianapolis on the Tony Bruno Show

GMC BLOG LIKE THE PROS

Posted by Boston989:

Baseball was originally created as entertainment. However, as time has gone on, more and more people have become so involved with their teams that they are almost as important to them as their jobs. As a junior in high school, surely I should have other things to work on, yet every night I sit down and watch every second of that game.

Baseball isn't a game anymore. It's still fun to watch, but it's become



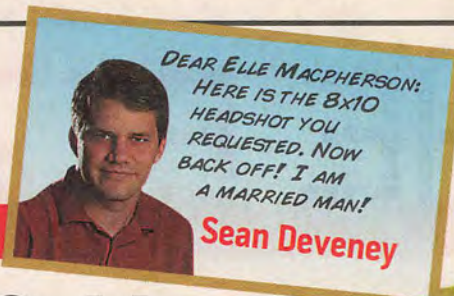
BOB LEVERONE / SN

more than a game. Baseball is life. MLB coined the phrase *I Live For This*. I always thought that campaign was kind of over the top, and then I realized they might as well have used me on one of those ads because that is exactly how I feel. Baseball is life, and life is damn good. Here's to baseball, in all its glory.

To see more of Boston989's blog, and many others, visit [SPORTINGBLOGS at sportingnews.com](http://SPORTINGBLOGS.sportingnews.com).

MY TURN

sdeveney@sportingnews.com



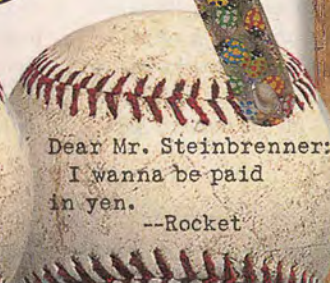
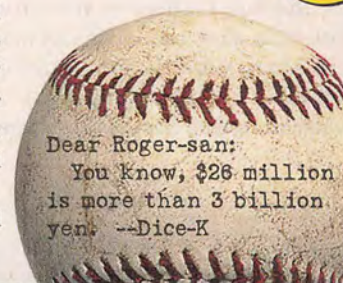
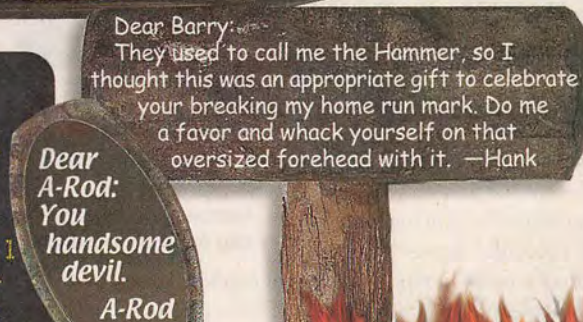
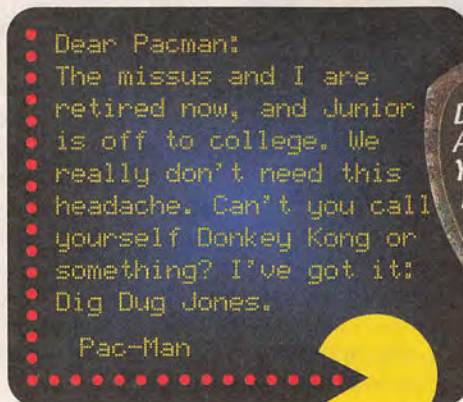
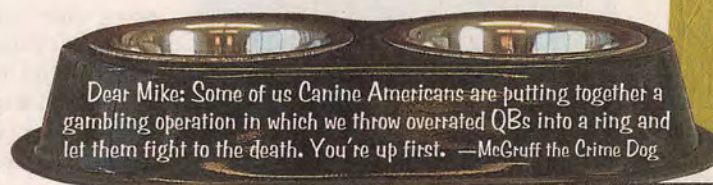
Dr. Heckle and Mr. Snide

Some people just won't get the message until you write it down and show 'em

A few weeks back, fans in Cleveland were busily riding Toronto center fielder Vernon Wells. Most players simply ignore heckling. But Wells is a genius. Between innings, he wrote a note on a baseball to his chief center field tormentor. Then Wells threw it to the guy as he took the field. On the ball, Wells wrote, "Dear Mr. Dork" (good one, Vern) and went on to wonder what gas station the fellow worked at, so that Wells could stop by and yell at him.

What a brilliant way to communicate. Sometimes words fail us. But words written on a ball—or, heck, any object—allow us to express how we really feel without the awkwardness of actually speaking. Just think, instead of the odd press conference during which playoff flop Dirk Nowitzki was presented the MVP award last week, the NBA commissioner could have simply written "Dear Dirk: Here. David Stern" on the trophy, handed it to Nowitzki and walked off.

Thank you, Vernon. You've inspired endless possibilities ...



WE EXAMINED EVERYTHING.



AND OVERLOOKED NOTHING.

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THE BIZ

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The Biz Quiz

The Indy Racing League is looking to land its first title sponsor since 2001. You know all about two of the IRL's primary selling points—Danica Patrick and the Indy 500—but what eco-friendly aspect could help the league lure a sponsor?

Answer at bottom of page

The little leagues that could

An independent attitude is a hit with fans

The often rocky, always winding road to success is getting a little smoother and a little straighter every year for independent baseball leagues.

They're drawing fans in record numbers, building stadiums at a rapid rate and making money as never before. It has been a bumpy ride—in the past 15 years, more than 50 teams have folded before their second season—but the 70 teams currently in nine independent leagues are expected to generate nearly \$150 million in revenue in 2007.

The success of the past decade has had a bit of an "If you build it, they will come" framework. The Atlantic League was founded on the idea of every stadium's meeting Class AAA standards. The Frontier League opened play in 1993 but didn't really take off until 1999, when expansion franchises in the suburbs of St. Louis and Chicago opened with brand-new stadiums. The combination of fresh locales and bigger, better ballparks was an instant success, and now the Frontier League has 10 new ballparks, with development plans for five more by 2009.



JAN-MICHAEL STUMP / TRAVERSE CITY RECORD-EAGLE / AP

Independent leagues deserve a tip of the cap for their growth the past 15 years.

don't operate with the same advertising restrictions as affiliated minor league teams, so marketing possibilities are practically unlimited. "We could put a company logo on every base in every ballpark," says Stephen Farrell, a partner at Brandt Farrell Sports Marketing in New Jersey. "We could mow a logo on every field."

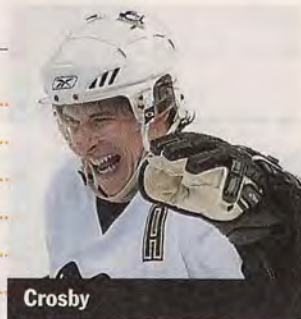
Of course, just because they could doesn't mean they should. But that's the freedom inherent with independent baseball. "Like any business, it's a lot more fun to be your own boss," says Chris Hanners, owner of the Chillicothe (Ohio) Paints of the Frontier League. "And it's so much more rewarding than answering to a parent club."

Close to two-thirds of the independent clubs have either built a new stadium or extensively renovated their park since 1998, at a combined cost of more than \$500 million. And fans have flooded in. Eight million fans are expected this summer, up 49 percent from five years ago. Of the top 50 minor league teams in terms of average attendance, seven clubs play independent ball.

The money isn't just flowing in from fans—20 franchises have naming-rights deals totaling \$32 million in place for their parks. And independent leagues

BIZ BUZZ

Who says nobody pays attention to hockey? **Sidney Crosby**, the Penguins' teen sensation and *SPORTING NEWS*' 2007 player of the year, was voted No. 5 overall in a Time.com poll of the most influential people of the year and No. 1 among sports figures. Apparently **Pat Brisson**, Crosby's agent, knew what he was doing when he kept Crosby from signing many long-term endorsement deals during his rookie season. ➤ Rosenblatt Stadium and Omaha, Neb., are synonymous with the College World Series, but the 59-year old stadium could be on its way out. The *Omaha World Herald* reports that city officials are looking into a \$50 million, 9,000-seat ballpark that could expand to 25,000 for the CWS. But the city needs a long-term commitment—the current agreement expires after the 2010 CWS—from the NCAA that the event will remain in Omaha. The 2007 CWS begins June 15. ➤ Soap, anyone? Lever 2000 is targeting tennis fans by pouring \$2.5 million into consumer promotion this summer. Part of the plan is to wrap 2 million bars of soap with an offer for free lessons.



JONATHAN HAYWARD / AP

Crosby

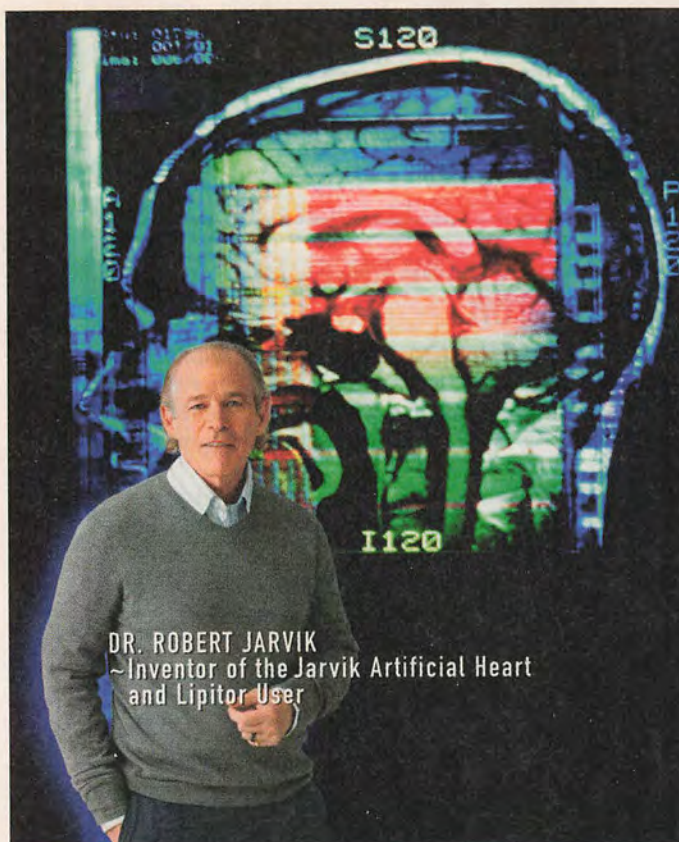
SPORTS FUTURES

■ Baseball fans in Oakland, Pittsburgh and Washington don't have to worry about leaving their tickets in the glove box. As long as they have a cell phone—and nobody goes anywhere without a cell phone—forgetting tickets won't be an issue. Thanks to Tickets.com, a subsidiary of MLB Advanced Media, fans can have a bar-coded ticket delivered to their cell phone, which then can be scanned at designated ballpark entrances.

■ The Brewers' hot start has been a boon for, well, everybody offering anything with the team's logo. Merchandise sales are up 50 percent from last season, according to the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, and attendance could challenge the franchise record of 2.81 million, set in 2001, Miller Park's opening year.

Answer to Biz Quiz: IRL cars use 100 percent fuel-grade ethanol, which is manufactured from grains, primarily corn and milo, and is renewable and biodegradable.

Upon further review ... Jersey Nos. 1 and 2 have been allowed in NCAA basketball since the 1999-2000 season. The information was incorrect in the May 14 issue.



DR. ROBERT JARVIK
~Inventor of the Jarvik Artificial Heart
and Lipitor User

In patients with type 2 diabetes,

Lipitor
reduces risk
of stroke

by **48%***

If you also have at least one other risk factor for heart disease including high blood pressure, smoking or complications of diabetes, including eye disease and protein in urine.



LIPITOR®
atorvastatin calcium
tablets

*That means in a large clinical study, 2.8% of patients taking a sugar pill or placebo had a stroke compared to 1.5% of patients taking Lipitor.


IMPORTANT INFORMATION: LIPITOR is a prescription drug. It is used in patients with type 2 diabetes and at least one other risk factor for heart disease such as high blood pressure, smoking or complications of diabetes, including eye disease and protein in urine, to reduce the risk of heart attack and stroke. When diet and exercise alone are not enough, LIPITOR is used along with a low-fat diet and exercise to lower cholesterol.

LIPITOR is not for everyone. It is not for those with liver problems. And it is not for women who are nursing, pregnant or may become pregnant. If you take LIPITOR, tell your doctor if you feel any new muscle pain or weakness. This could be a sign of rare but serious muscle side effects. Tell your doctor about all medications you take. This may help avoid serious drug interactions. Your doctor should do blood tests to check your liver function before and during treatment and may adjust your dose. The most common side effects are gas, constipation, stomach pain and heartburn. They tend to be mild and often go away.

Please see additional important information on next page.

When diet and exercise alone are not enough, adding LIPITOR can help. LIPITOR is one of many cholesterol-lowering treatment options that you and your doctor can consider.

Ask your doctor. Call 1-888-LIPITOR (1-888-547-4867). Or find us on the web at www.lipitor.com

Uninsured? Need help paying for medicine? Pfizer has programs that can help, no matter your age or income. You may even qualify for free Pfizer medicines. Call 1-866-706-2400. Or visit www.pfizerhelpfulanswers.com. 

IMPORTANT FACTS



LIPITOR
atorvastatin calcium
tablets

(LIP-ih-tore)

LOWERING YOUR HIGH CHOLESTEROL

High cholesterol is more than just a number, it's a risk factor that should not be ignored. If your doctor said you have high cholesterol, you may be at an increased risk for heart attack. But the good news is, you can take steps to lower your cholesterol.

With the help of your doctor and a cholesterol-lowering medicine like LIPITOR, along with diet and exercise, you could be on your way to lowering your cholesterol.

Ready to start eating right and exercising more? Talk to your doctor and visit the American Heart Association at www.americanheart.org.

WHO IS LIPITOR FOR?

Who can take LIPITOR:

- People who cannot lower their cholesterol enough with diet and exercise
- Adults and children over 10

Who should NOT take LIPITOR:

- Women who are pregnant, may be pregnant, or may become pregnant. LIPITOR may harm your unborn baby. If you become pregnant, stop LIPITOR and call your doctor right away.
- Women who are breast-feeding. LIPITOR can pass into your breast milk and may harm your baby.
- People with liver problems
- People allergic to anything in LIPITOR

BEFORE YOU START LIPITOR

Tell your doctor:

- About all medications you take, including prescriptions, over-the-counter medications, vitamins, and herbal supplements
- If you have muscle aches or weakness
- If you drink more than 2 alcoholic drinks a day
- If you have diabetes or kidney problems
- If you have a thyroid problem

ABOUT LIPITOR

LIPITOR is a prescription medicine. Along with diet and exercise, it lowers "bad" cholesterol in your blood. It can also raise "good" cholesterol (HDL-C).

LIPITOR can lower the risk of heart attack or stroke in patients who have risk factors for heart disease such as:

- age, smoking, high blood pressure, low HDL-C, heart disease in the family, *or*
- diabetes with risk factor such as eye problems, kidney problems, smoking, or high blood pressure

POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS OF LIPITOR

Serious side effects in a small number of people:

- **Muscle problems** that can lead to kidney problems, including kidney failure. Your chance for muscle problems is higher if you take certain other medicines with LIPITOR.
- **Liver problems.** Your doctor may do blood tests to check your liver before you start LIPITOR and while you are taking it.

Symptoms of muscle or liver problems include:

- Unexplained muscle weakness or pain, especially if you have a fever or feel very tired
- Nausea, vomiting, or stomach pain
- Brown or dark-colored urine
- Feeling more tired than usual
- Your skin and the whites of your eyes turn yellow

If you have these symptoms, call your doctor right away.

The most common side effects of LIPITOR are:

- Headache
- Constipation
- Diarrhea, gas
- Upset stomach and stomach pain
- Rash
- Muscle and joint pain

Side effects are usually mild and may go away by themselves. Fewer than 3 people out of 100 stopped taking LIPITOR because of side effects.

HOW TO TAKE LIPITOR

Do:

- Take LIPITOR as prescribed by your doctor.
- Try to eat heart-healthy foods while you take LIPITOR.
- Take LIPITOR at any time of day, with or without food.
- If you miss a dose, take it as soon as you remember. But if it has been more than 12 hours since your missed dose, wait. Take the next dose at your regular time.

Don't:

- Do not change or stop your dose before talking to your doctor.
- Do not start new medicines before talking to your doctor.
- Do not give your LIPITOR to other people. It may harm them even if your problems are the same.
- Do not break the tablet.

NEED MORE INFORMATION?

- Ask your doctor or health care provider.
- Talk to your pharmacist.
- Go to www.lipitor.com or call 1-888-LIPITOR.



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LPIF Rev 2, Dec 2005

2007 NHL Awards

The biggest prize of the NHL season still is up for the taking, but our end-of-the-season awards are in. Winners in each category were determined by votes from their peers, and voting was conducted before the playoffs began. Individuals couldn't vote for themselves, and players could not vote for teammates.

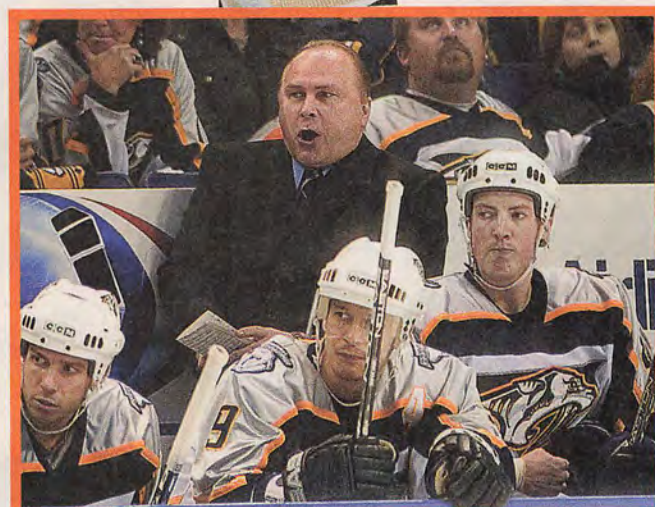
PLAYER OF THE YEAR

Sidney Crosby
C, Penguins

Fans weren't the only ones impressed with Crosby's sophomore season. The Art Ross Trophy winner as the league's leading scorer received 110 of the 210 votes from his fellow players; Lightning center Vincent Lecavalier was a distant second with 24 votes.

Crosby led his team into the playoffs and finished the season with 120 points on 36 goals and 84 assists. His presence and play also helped the Penguins secure an arena deal to stay in Pittsburgh. Not bad for a kid who won't turn 20 until August.

BOB LEVERONE / SN



MATTHEW KUTZ / SN ARCHIVES

COACH OF THE YEAR

Barry Trotz Predators

Trotz's ability to keep this team together and at the top of its game throughout the season earned him coach of the year honors. Trotz, who received five of the 22 votes cast, deftly handled individual players to ensure the Predators' consistent success. He found a way to incorporate Peter Forsberg into the lineup after a late-season trade, something that was not as easy as it may sound. Penguins coach Michel Therrien was second with 3½ votes.

EXECUTIVE OF THE YEAR

David Poile

Executive VP-general manager, Predators

Poile's Predators didn't make the long playoff run he had hoped for, but the roster he assembled was one of the league's best during the regular season—and earned him the respect of his peers.

"He has drafted well and used those drafted players in a prudent way to improve his team at the right time," Bruins general manager Peter Chiarelli says. "The development of his drafts and the timing of the acquisition of free agents has been very well-synchronized."

Poile received 11 of the 39 votes for executive of the year. Sabres G.M. Darcy Regier was second with nine votes.



ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

Evgeni Malkin

C, Penguins

Malkin wasn't head and shoulders above the rest of the rookies, as was expected when the season began. The Penguins' Jordan Staal and the Avalanche's Paul Stastny also had very impressive seasons, but Malkin's left the biggest impact on his peers. He picked up 121 of 210 votes cast; Stastny finished second with 49.



BOB LEVERONE / SN

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ALL-STAR TEAM ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

C Sidney Crosby
Penguins

LW Dany Heatley
Senators

RW Martin St. Louis
Lightning

D Nicklas Lidstrom
Red Wings

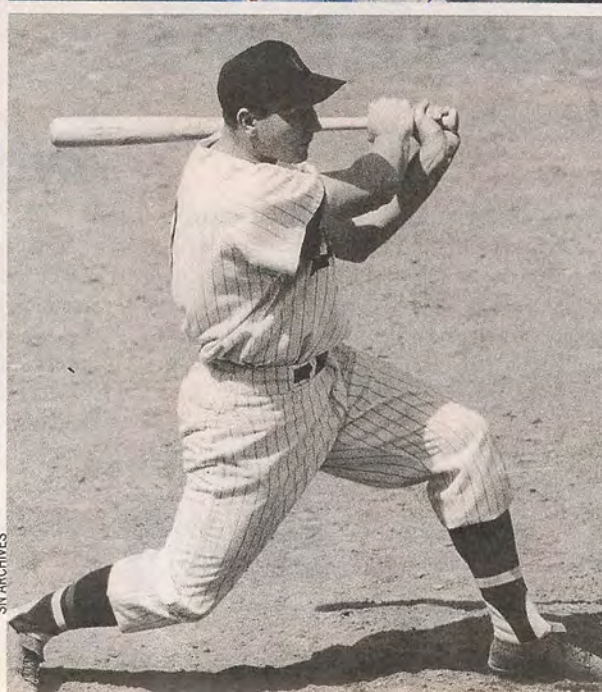
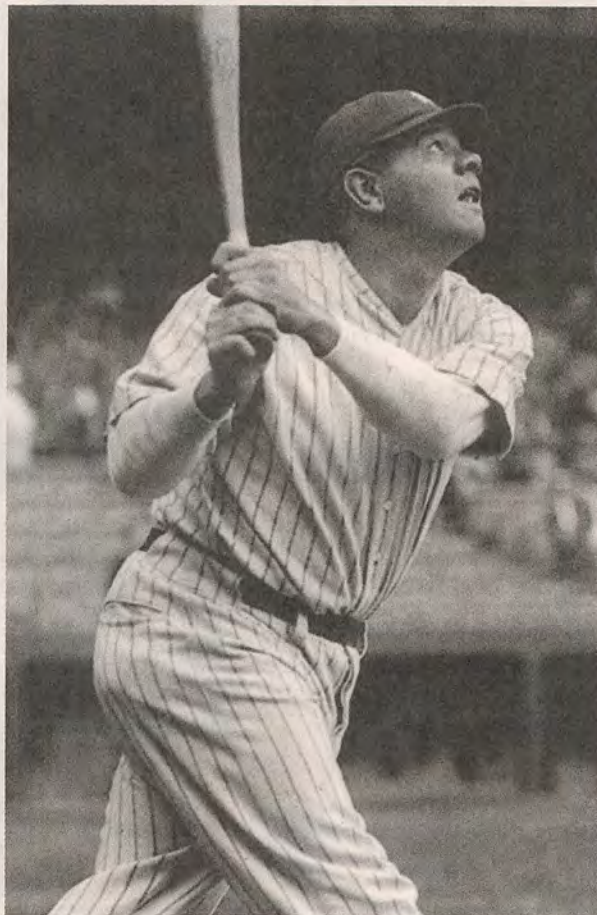
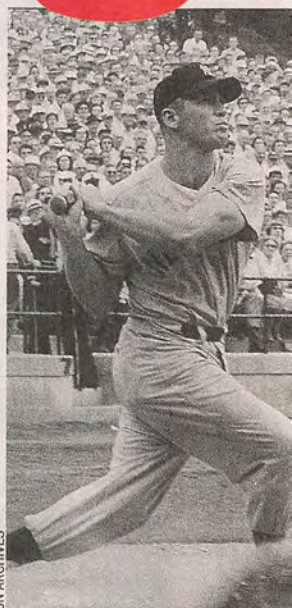
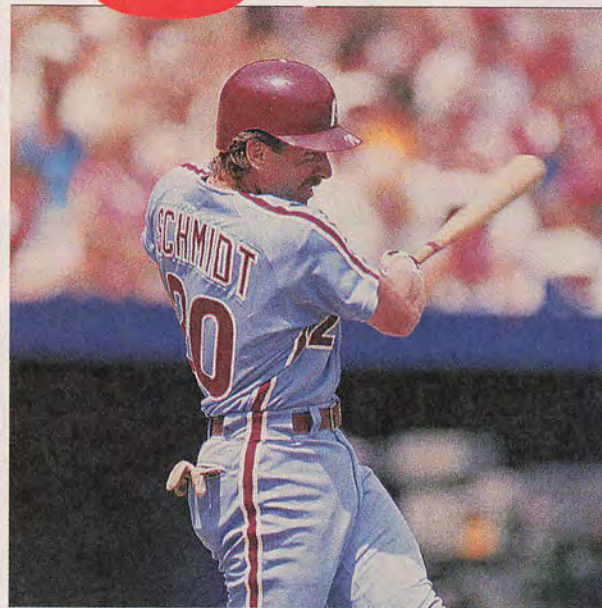
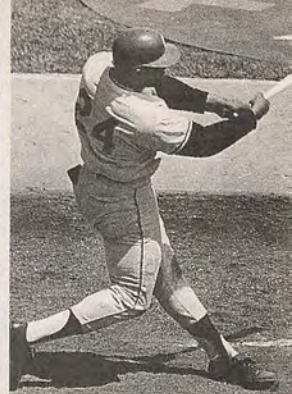
D Scott Niedermayer
Ducks

G Martin Brodeur
Devils

MLB Going ...

Sporting News has seen 'em all touch 'em all. First there was Ruth, then Aaron, now Bonds. With sports' most hallowed record on the verge of changing hands, we pause to consider all things related to and revolving around a simple concept: hitting a baseball very, very far.

going

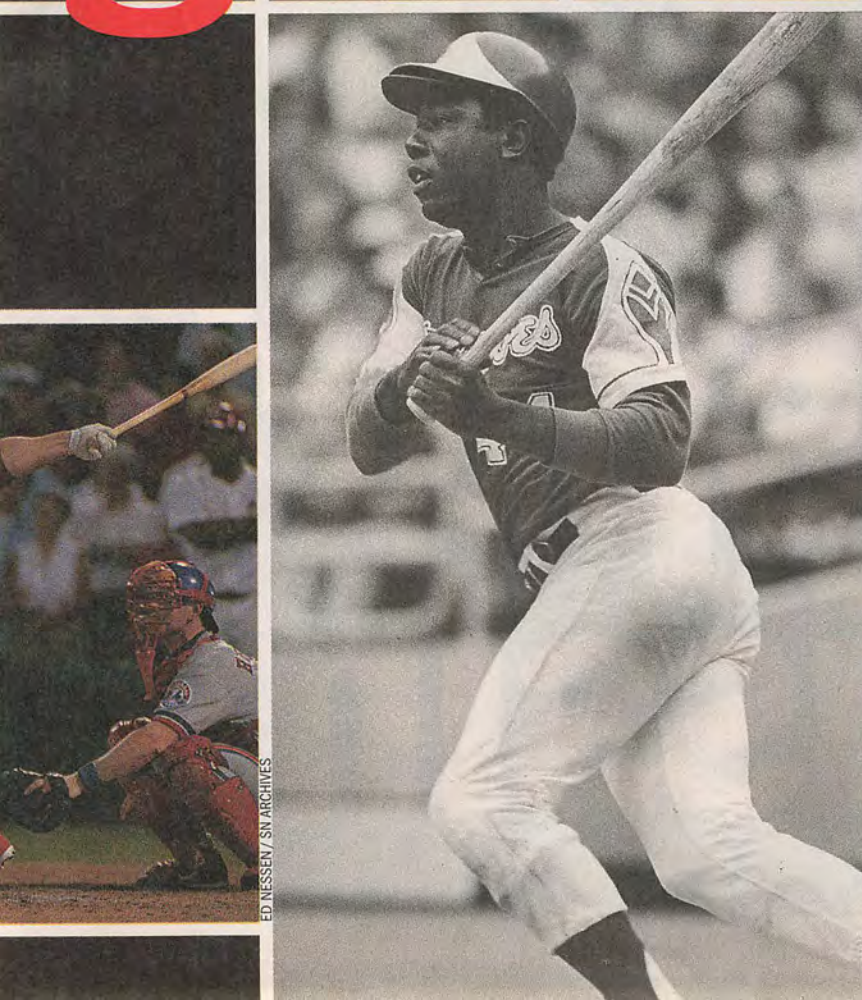




CHARLES M. CONLON / SN ARCHIVES

DILIP VISHWANATH / SN ARCHIVES

gone!



SN ARCHIVES




ED NESSEN / SN ARCHIVES



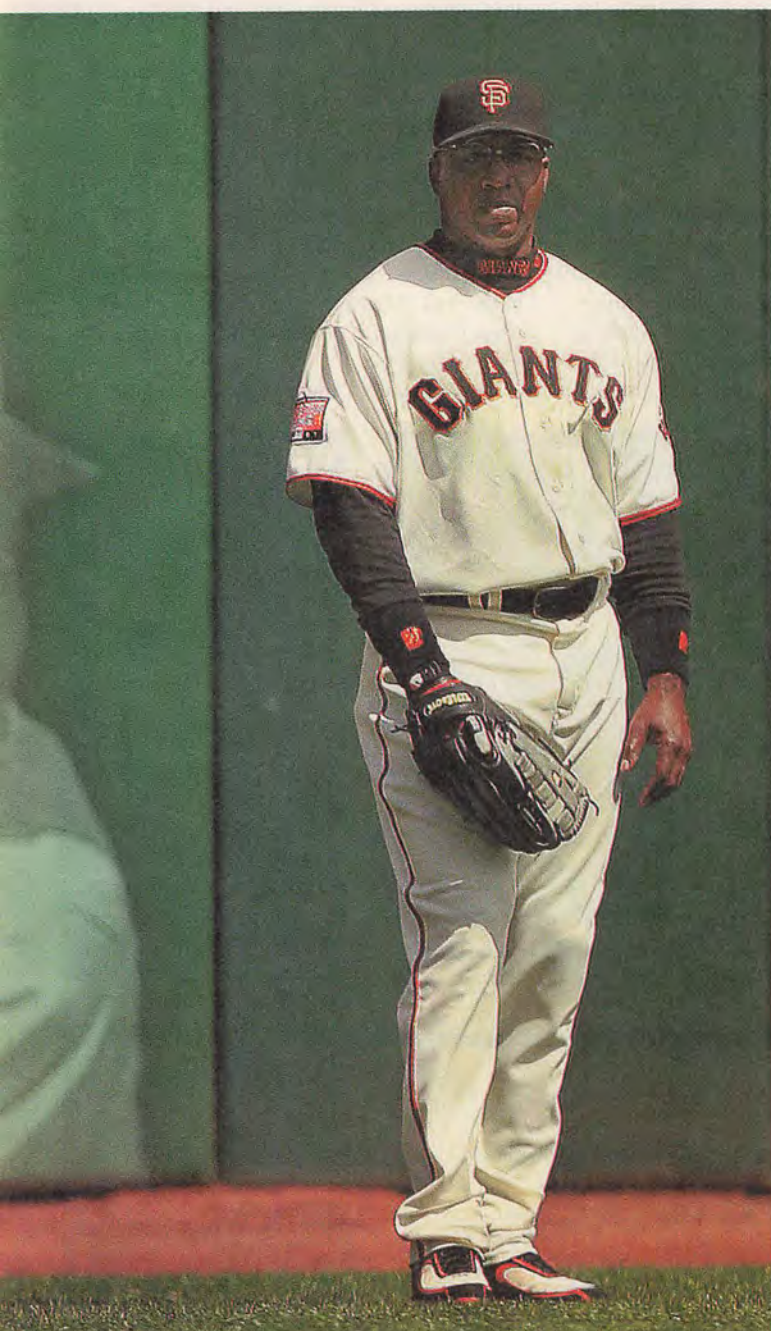
SN ARCHIVES

BOB LEVERONE / SN



NG LEGENDS

The spark is missing



There's little electricity surrounding **Barry Bonds'** march to 756. A lot of the blame lies with baseball's power overload.
By Sean Deveney

TONY AVELAR / AP

If baseball's record book is a cathedral, its cornerstone is 755. Baseball's home run record is the most important milestone in sports and has been since Babe Ruth was piling up power numbers in the '20s and '30s. That cornerstone has been altered just once since, when Hank Aaron hit his 715th in 1974.

Yet the fellow who is inching toward Aaron's career total of 755 isn't talking about it. Giants outfielder Barry Bonds sat in a crowded visitors dugout at Minute Maid Park in Houston last week, swarmed by reporters and photographers, shaking his head when asked about his pursuit of the record. "I haven't been giving any interviews about myself, guys, and I'm not going to start now," Bonds said. Repeatedly, end-run questions were posed, clever attempts to get Bonds to talk about the record. No luck. After the fourth such question, Bonds' eyes took on a what-did-I-do-to-deserve-this glaze, and he asked the heavens, "What did I tell them?"

We are experiencing the Power Era Hangover, and Bonds—he of the ongoing federal perjury investigation in relation to the BALCO steroids trial—is playing the part of the headache.

Home run production has soared over the past 14 seasons. In 1992, big league teams averaged 116.8 home runs. In 1993, the figure was 143.9, and the Power Era was born. By 2006, teams averaged 179.5 homers. This has changed the game and given us teams laden with power threats. Slap-hitting shortstops and basestealing center fielders are *so* 1985. Give us hulking power machines. Give us batting practice moon shots. Give us guys like Bonds, preferably nine of them.

Pity the modern-day pitcher. "When I came into the league (in 1987)," says Mets lefthander Tom Glavine, who gave up Bonds' 745th on May 9, "there was probably one guy on every team you'd say, 'I've got to be careful with because he can hit the ball out of the ballpark to the opposite field.' Ten, 15 years later, everybody in the lineup can do it."

There are any number of ways to interpret Glavine's lament, but ultimately, the problem for baseball is that if everybody in the lineup can smack a ball 400 feet to the opposite field, how meaningful is a home run anymore? With Bonds' chase almost at its climax, now is a good time to meditate on that question. No doubt the longball has been cheapened over the years by its prevalence, aided by increasingly hitter-friendly ballparks, a shrinking strike zone and a pool of pitching talent thinned by expansion. Most of the cheapening, though, is a result of the hints and allegations of widespread steroids use. Yeah, we all still love the longball. But maybe we love it too much.

That's where Bonds comes in. He has never failed a drug test, but because he testified that he (unwittingly) used steroids, and because he is nearing baseball's most sacred number, he's the headache the game can't cure. During a news conference last week, commissioner Bud Selig sidestepped questions about whether he will be in attendance when Bonds breaks the record. Aaron plans to be far away. When asked about the impending record, Selig let out a sarcastic, "Is he really approaching?"

Selig's testy question is the perfect way to sum up baseball's migraine. Last week, admitted steroids user Jason Giambi called on players to make a public apology. Astros first baseman Lance Berkman called Bonds' potential record "tainted." Astros second baseman Craig Biggio said, "There probably won't be much of a celebration." Red Sox pitcher Curt Schilling called Bonds a cheater on a Boston radio program but later apologized.

We are left with a drama starring an awkward cast of characters. The old king won't be there, the new king isn't talking and the game's pooh-bah might decide he has theater tickets that night. Which brings us back to the question (hold the sarcasm): Is Bonds really approaching?

"It's silly," says David Vincent, the home run guru for the Society for American Baseball Research. "Barry Bonds is going to have the record, and he earned it. Of course the commissioner should be there. But the

thing is, the home run record means so much to so many people. People don't want to see it broken."

It is naive to think the breaking of a record of this magnitude should be accompanied by jubilation. Though there was fanfare for Aaron's pursuit of Ruth, he was as miserable then as Bonds is now. "I used to love to come to the ballpark," Aaron said in '74. "Now I hate it." Yet, in recent years, other records have been eclipsed—Roger Maris' single-season home run record in 1998, Lou Gehrig's consecutive-games streak in 1995—by smiling players graciously receiving adulation from fans everywhere. Not this time. Bonds is universally booed as a visiting player.

The difference is the steroids stain, which is not quite fair. After all, of the 16 players suspended by MLB for steroids use, 10 have been pitchers. Vincent points out that home runs have risen since baseball's inception and that the current boom is not statistically out of whack with the longball's historical rise. When Ruth changed the game by swinging for the fences eight decades ago, many groaned that he was ruining baseball. "This is the same song, different verse," Vincent says.

Besides, there is some hypocrisy here. If everyone is outraged over steroids, why has MLB set attendance records three straight years? We may be afraid to admit this, but it seems we—even the old codgers of yesteryear—like this juiced version of the game. When Hall of Fame sluggers Harmon Killebrew and Ted

Williams were chatting by phone in 1998, during Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa's pursuit of Maris' record, Williams cut short the conversation. Killebrew says the Splendid Splinter told him, "I've got to go. The Cardinals are playing the Cubs."

Home runs hit before the Power Era are quickly losing meaning, too. Former slugger Dale Murphy hit 398, and though he says he's not bitter or angry, the legacy of clean players such as Murphy has been shortchanged. "This is the Steroid Era," Murphy says. "There's no question in my mind that our numbers are diminished by guys who have been cheating. In that sense, I feel cheated."

Murphy has taken action, starting the iWon'tCheat! foundation to educate kids and coaches about steroids. It's too late to wipe out the effects of the Power Era, but Murphy says the societal mindset that led to the steroids boom must be altered by reaching adolescents. "Ultimately, the message is that it is OK to bend the rules to hit more home runs," he says. "That's an attitude that goes throughout society, and society pays for it. You see it in politics, with all the ethics problems. And

think about it: Do you want your pension fund manager to think it's OK to bend the rules?"

If we can't be celebratory about the longball, perhaps we should be philosophical—examine where it has been and where it is going. Yes, baseball is cranking out power and reeling in the resultant profits. But it also has produced an embarrassing congressional hearing, an MLB-mandated investigation and an all-time great power hitter—McGwire—being denied a spot in the Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility. Now, it's about to give us Bonds, a pariah of a record-breaker.

Or did you not know he was approaching? **SN**



SN ARCHIVES

Murphy wants to nip future cheating in the bud.

Bonds numbers that count

2 Seasons Bonds has led the N.L. in homers.

4 Seasons Hank Aaron led the N.L. in homers.

8 Times Bonds has hit 40 or more homers in a season.

8 Times Aaron hit 40 or more homers in a season.

8 Most home runs any pitcher has given up to Bonds (Greg Maddux, Terry Mulholland, Chan Ho Park, John Smoltz and Curt Schilling).

39 Home runs at Qualcomm Stadium in San Diego, Bonds' most in any visiting park.

86 Home runs against the Padres—his most against any opponent.

114 Active pitchers he has homered against.

370 Home runs at home.

375 Home runs on the road.

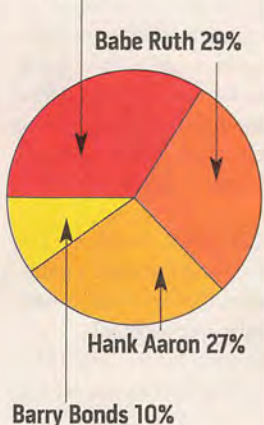
438 Pitchers he has homered against.

From the HR department ...

An unscientific sampling of our online sluggers—fans and members at sportingnews.com—takes some mighty cuts at questions related to hitters, homers, pitchers and The Ball:

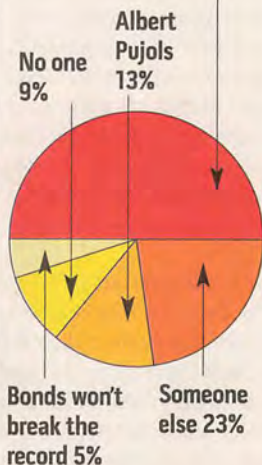
Who's your favorite home run hitter?

None of the above 34%

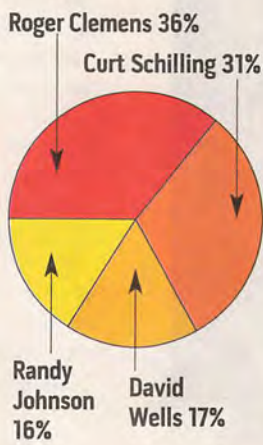


Who will break Bonds' record?

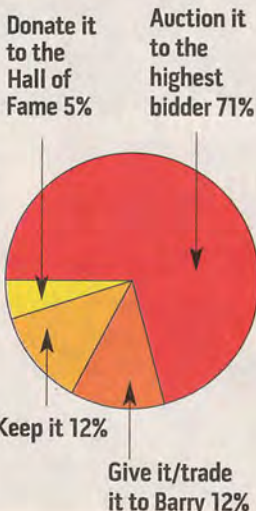
Alex Rodriguez 50%



What pitcher do you hope serves up Bonds' record-breaker?



If I retrieved No. 756 from McCovey Cove, I would ...



Bonds' place in history is secure*

Unless someone produces the goods on Barry. Then it will be time to invoke the 'A' word. *By Stan McNeal*

When Barry Bonds breaks the most famous record in American sports, there won't be much anyone can do besides cheer or boo. Sure, we can speculate on how he developed this amazing power at 35 and on why his head seemed to morph from cantaloupe to watermelon along the way, and we can even go beyond speculation and pass judgment one way or the other.

But we can't prove he did anything wrong. And unless unquestionable evidence comes along that proves Barry broke the rules, baseball won't be able to do anything except put his name beside the record.

Nothing, however, can stop us from playing the hypothetical card. Let's assume, in fact, that ironclad proof surfaces that Bonds indeed has taken illegal performance enhancers. Let's say we find out, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that somewhere along the trail to 756 that he was juicing.

If that were to happen, then the most famous record in American sports would belong to a known cheater. The most famous record in American sports would be tainted. Baseball then would have options.

Option No. 1: Strike Bonds from the record books. Completely. Just leave Henry Aaron and 755 on the top line. As far as the record book is concerned, it would be as though Bonds had never hit a home run. Sounds tempting, eh?

Well, as much as those who view the world in black and white would like that, wiping Bonds from the record book wouldn't work.

If baseball decided to strike his home run mark, would it also wipe out Bonds' walks, hits and runs? Would it also delete the numbers of every major leaguer who has tested positive for performance enhancers, or would only the record setters disappear? What records are we talking about, anyway? Would they be limited to major league records, or would American



League, National League and team records also be included? That could get messy.

Then there's the issue of numbers. In no game are numbers more ingrained than in baseball. Part of the game's beauty is to be able to compare the career stats of Bonds, Aaron and Babe Ruth. Part of the beauty in stats is the manner in which they balance out. For every Bonds home run, some pitcher's home runs allowed went up. If Bonds were struck from the books, how would such an imbalance be rectified?

A simple wipeout of Bonds' statistics poses too many problems.

An asterisk would be a clear and simple way of distinguishing the cheaters from the clean players.

Option No. 2: Do nothing. Bonds would not be the first cheater, and there has been no outcry to subtract Rafael Palmeiro's 569 homers or 3,020 hits from the books. If baseball started deleting the numbers of all cheaters, the record book might look noticeably thinner.

Besides, doing nothing to Bonds' record would be in line with what the game did about steroids for many years. That is, not a thing. So why get all high and mighty now?

Well, doing nothing would be akin to denying the steroids era existed, and Bud Selig has admitted too many times (though it took him a while) that, as much as he hates this fact, steroids have been abused on his watch. Selig has made plenty of mistakes in his 15-year

stewardship, but he has tried to do what's best for the game. He knows doing nothing about the record would not be the right thing.

Option No. 3: Bring out the asterisk. Yes, for the first time, baseball should use the "*". As much as legend indicates otherwise, baseball did not go with an asterisk when Roger Maris hit 61 homers in 1961. Instead, a line was added in the record book to denote the record-setter in a 162-game season as well as in a 154-game season.

In our hypothetical, another line wouldn't be necessary. An asterisk would be the answer. Something like:

Home runs, career: 756, Barry Bonds* (used illegal performance-enhancing drugs).

Or: 756, Barry Bonds* (some home runs were hit with the assistance of steroids).

Or maybe something more to the point: 756, Barry Bonds* (proven cheater).

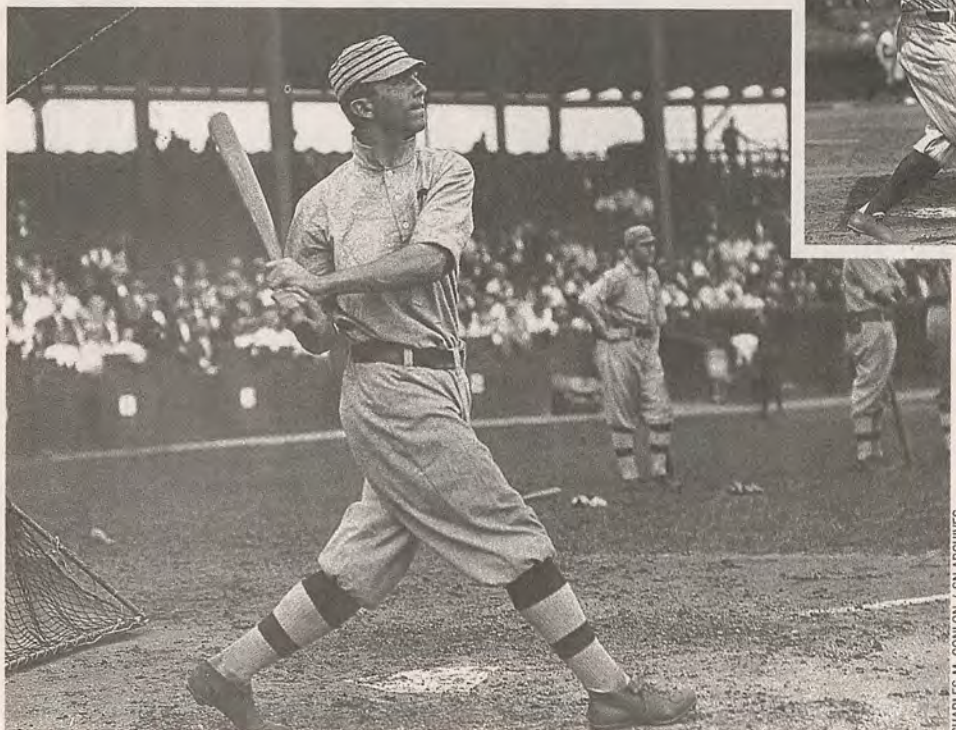
That tiny asterisk would say a great deal, no matter what words followed.

The asterisk would not be limited to Bonds, either. It would be used alongside the name of any certified cheater. What would be wrong with an "*" beside the name of Palmeiro and others who have been (or will be) caught using performance enhancers? An asterisk would be a clear and simple way of distinguishing the cheaters from the clean players.

Considering the dark cloud steroids have cast over baseball, such a distinction is needed for the sake of the clean players—and the record book.

SN

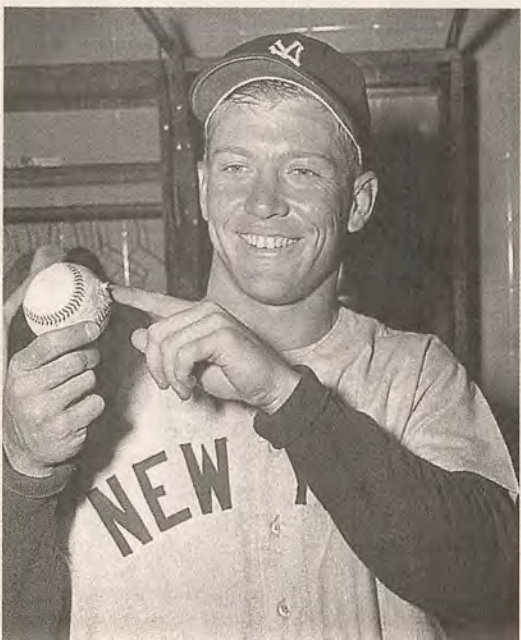
Baker's, Bonds'— and every big bash between— we've seen 'em all



John Franklin Baker becomes "Home Run" Baker by hitting homers on consecutive days in the 1911 World Series.

"The Athletics tied the score when Baker, their brilliant third baseman, who won Monday's game with a home run, drove one of Christy Mathewson's benders into the far reaches of the right field stand for a homer in the ninth. They won out in the eleventh on three safe hits, helped out by two Giant errors. ... When New York forged ahead in the third, the echoes were awakened by a big uproar. But when Baker, in the ninth, hit out his homer, the din was deafening."

—SPORTING NEWS, October 26, 1911



Mickey Mantle hits a Griffith Stadium home run estimated at 565 feet.

"Chuck Stobbs got a strike on Mantle and then threw a fastball. Mickey took the giant swing. The ball struck the football scoreboard, now converted into a sign boosting a beer, some 60 feet above the field level and about 500 feet from the plate. The leather caromed off, out of sight. It developed that it had flown clear over Fifth Street, which is right behind the left field wall, and had landed in a back yard at 434 Oakdale Street. There the ball was retrieved by 10-year-old Don Dunnaway, a surprised and delighted Negro lad."

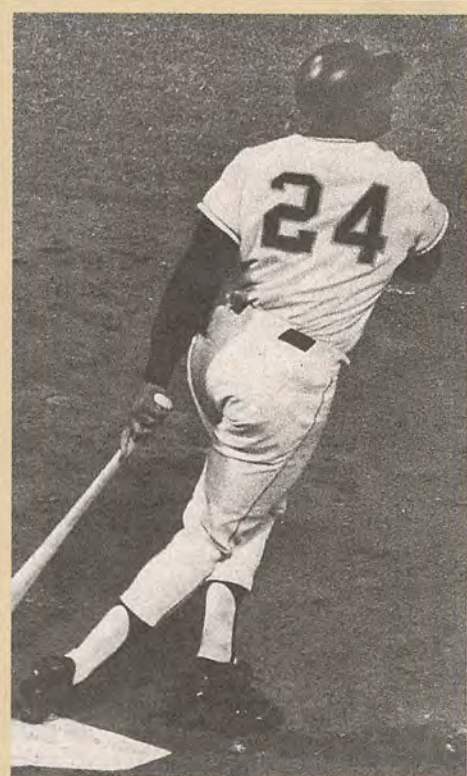
—SPORTING NEWS, April 29, 1953



Babe Ruth hits 54 home runs in 1920, breaking his record of 29, set the year before.

"On this trip through the West, Mr. Ruth has been busy shaking down an old record every day or so. The age of the record depends upon the date of Mr. Ruth's last home run. Mr. Ruth is in the jolly old position of having nobody but himself to beat. He sets up home run records so he can smash them. He smashes them and sets a new mark for himself to shoot at the following day. Such is life for Mr. George Herman Ruth, one shattered record after another."

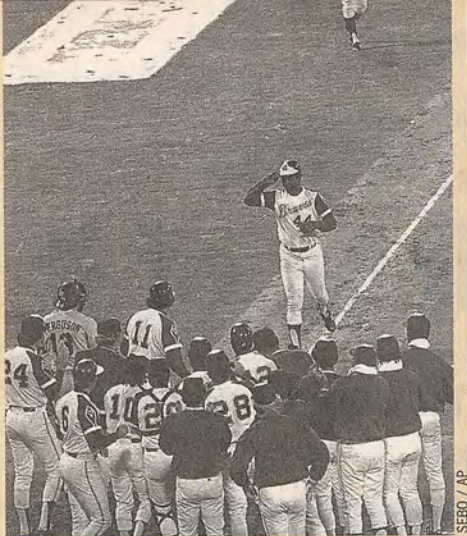
—SPORTING NEWS, August 12, 1920



Willie Mays hits his 512th home run and becomes the National League's all-time home run champ.

"The home run, struck off a high, outside change-up, created the greatest ovation in the long history of baseball on the shores of San Francisco. It was bedlam that lasted for only a little more than 5 minutes on this evening, but its echo will last a long time. ... Not a person was in his seat as Mays took the long run. And nobody sat down for more than 5 minutes. They screamed, 'We want Willie!' Shortly afterward, Mays was engulfed by his teammates at the lip of the Giant dugout back of first base. He answered the chant of the crowd by re-emerging and tipping his cap and waving."

—SPORTING NEWS, May 21, 1966

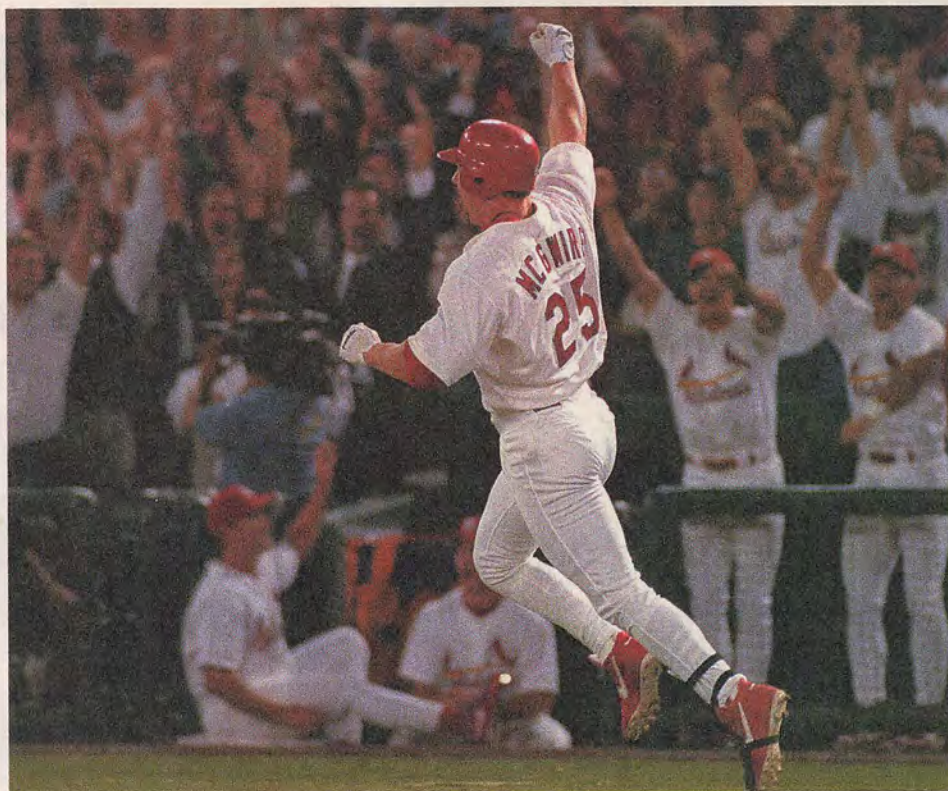


SEB0 / AP

Henry Aaron hits home run No. 715.

"The date was April 8, the time 9:07 p.m. The fabled Braves star flicked his famous wrists and propelled an Al Downing fastball over the left field fence and into the Braves' bullpen, where relief pitcher Tom House made the catch. Well, sir, Atlanta Stadium turned into instant pandemonium. They danced in the stands and stood and cheered. Dusty Baker jumped up and down and embraced Ralph Garr. Two unidentified teenagers bolted from the stands and gave Aaron an escort from second base to third. Almost as soon as Aaron touched home plate, guided by Garr, a black lady threw a strong embrace on the grinning Braves star and would not let go. Later, Aaron said, 'I didn't know how strong my mother was.'"

—SPORTING NEWS, April 27, 1974



ALBERT DICKSON / SN

Mark McGwire hits home run No. 62.

"Last week, when Cubs righthander Steve Trachsel threw a fastball low and inside, McGwire's bat lashed out with its odd combination of ferocity and control. No. 62 climbed on a frozen rope over the left field wall at Busch Stadium and dropped 341 feet from home plate, under the stands and into the hands of 22-year-old groundskeeper Tim Forneris. For an instant, we were uncertain. Then our hearts skipped a beat and goose bumps covered our flesh."

—SPORTING NEWS, September 21, 1998



ERIC RISBERG / AP

Barry Bonds hits home run No. 73.

"During the season's last week, Bonds was in such a groove that his 70th, 71st and 72nd home runs came in consecutive plate appearances on a total of four swings. ... Over his final six games and 25 plate appearances last week, Bonds made only six outs. He hit four home runs and four singles. He walked 10 times and was hit by a pitch once. The man wasn't missing. ... Though Sunday's season finale at Pac Bell Park, in which Bonds hit No. 73 off a 3-and-2 knuckleball from Dodgers righthander Dennis Springer, probably was his last game in a Giants uniform, nobody with the team is ready to admit that just yet."

—SPORTING NEWS, October 15, 2001

CELEBRATING THE



The long and, well, long of it

Three big boppers chat about four-baggers

By Stan McNeal and Ryan Fagan



Killebrew

SN ARCHIVES



Griffey

JAY DROWNS / SN



Thomas

DAVID DUROCHIK FOR SN

If you want to know about home runs, who better to ask than sluggers themselves? We asked three of the greatest—Ken Griffey, who is inching toward 600; Harmon Killebrew, No. 8 all-time, and Frank Thomas, who needs eight more to reach 500—to share their insight on all things power.

Do you remember your first homer in the majors?

Griffey: Eric King. First pitch (in his first at-bat) at the Kingdome. To left-center.

Killebrew: I was 18 years old, playing in old Griffith Stadium in Washington (June 24, 1955). Billy Hoeft was pitching, and Frank House was catching. He told me, "Kid we're going to throw you a fastball." Being so young, I didn't know whether to believe him or not. But the pitch came, it was a fastball and I hit it 476 feet. When I crossed home, House said, "Kid, that's the only time we're going to tell you what's coming."

Thomas: I forget who; it was a lefthander (Gary Wayne). A long time ago (August 28, 1990), in Minnesota. I hit my first one in a dome.

What part of hitting a home run is the most enjoyable?

Griffey: Touching home plate.

Killebrew: For me, the ones that were fun were the ones that helped win a ballgame. There was no high-fiving, no fist-pumping. You hit it and went about your business.

Thomas: I'm always surprised when it happens because it takes a lot to hit one. You've got to be perfect. The crack of the bat is a special sound every time you hit one. I'm not so surprised, but once it happens, it's like a phenomenon. I enjoy it every time I hit one.

What's your favorite ballpark for hitting home runs?

Griffey: Anywhere the wind is blowing out. In all directions. Wrigley would be one.

Killebrew: I think every righthanded hitter who played in the American League liked Fenway Park. You were never out of a game there. I think I

hit 37 home runs there but should have had 38. I hit a ball in the center field seats, and when I was rounding second, the umpire told me I better stay there. He said the ball had hit the wall. The next day, before the game, I went out and asked

Reggie Smith, who was playing center field for the Red Sox, if that ball hit the seats, and he said it did. That season I finished with 49 home runs.

Thomas: There's a few that I really like to hit in. Cleveland is one, Comiskey Park's one. And Fenway.



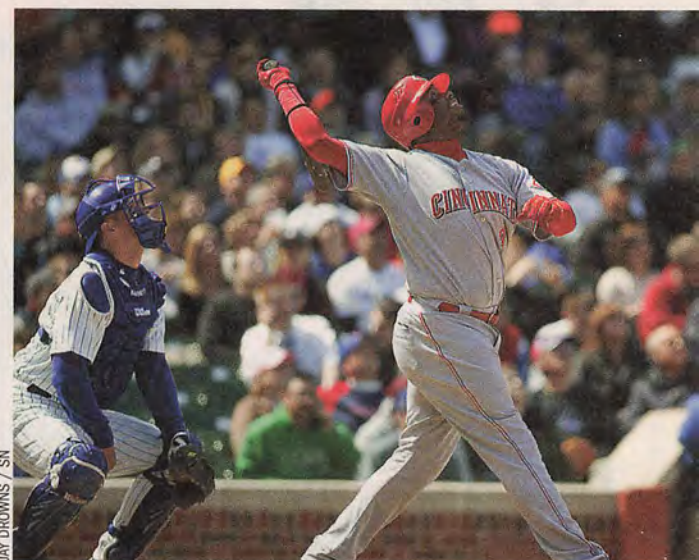
Hoeft

SN ARCHIVES



House

SN ARCHIVES



JAY DROWNS / SN

Griffey doesn't have to hit 'em great to get 'em out of Wrigley.



JAY DROWNS / SN

Comerica Park is as imposing to power hitters as the Motor City's previous stadium was.

What's the toughest ballpark to hit a homer in?

Griffey: Definitely Detroit. Detroit's always just big, even old Detroit.

Killebrew: There were several in those days. For a righthanded hitter, Yankee Stadium had that long center field, and left-center. Cleveland wasn't the easiest, either. You know, maybe good pitching had something to do with those places.

Thomas: Detroit. Yep, Detroit.

How have you tweaked your home run trot over the years?

Griffey: Not on purpose. It's just happened. Used to have that youthful trot. When you get older, it's not a matter of enjoying it more. It's more, whew, I don't have to run around here. It's a little slower.

Thomas: No; I've always respected it. I had a coach a long time ago tell me, "You hit them every day in batting practice, so don't act like it's your first time." I've always had respect for pitchers. They have to make a mistake for everything to go right for me, so why try to embarrass them?



JOHN CORDIS FOR SN

Did somebody go yard, ladies?

Do you find that chicks really do dig the longball?

Griffey: Well, my wife has one of those T-shirts. Still wears it to bed. Hers on the back says, "I have one of those longball hitters." They made her one special.

Thomas: I think they do. Everybody digs it. You watch ESPN and the only thing they high-

light is the home runs. The longball always has a place in everybody's minds.

If you could hit .365 with 235 hits and, say, 20 homers and 90 RBIs or .270 with 40 homers and 125 RBIs, which would you choose?

Griffey (laughing): I'm taking the .365 because I'd have a chance to win the batting title. I've hit 56, so that 40 doesn't do it for me.

Killebrew: No question: RBIs win ballgames.

Thomas: .270 because you're more dangerous. You have a better chance to win.

Which pitch (fastball, curve, slider, etc.) would you say you most often hit for a home run?

Griffey: I have no idea. Hopefully a fastball. Guys throw changeups, you get out front and hit it. Sliders, catch it before it really starts to break. Really, I have no idea.

Killebrew: I would go in streaks. Sometimes I'd hit more fastballs, some streaks I'd hit more breaking balls. But you can't play in the big leagues if you can't hit a fastball, so I'd say more fastballs than anything.

Thomas: I think a mixture of curveballs and fastballs. I've always been a good curveball hitter, and early in my career a lot of pitchers threw me a lot of curveballs.

Which fellow power hitter did you admire?

Griffey: George Foster.

Killebrew: Ted Williams. He was the greatest hitter of all time. When Ted took batting practice, everybody in the park stopped what they were doing and watched.

Thomas: You've got to watch what Barry (Bonds) does. It's incredible. Everybody wants to question him, if he did or he didn't, but the bottom line is he's been doing this a long time, and it is amazing to watch one of his.

How often do/did you go to the plate trying specifically to hit a home run?

Griffey: Only when it's necessary. Late in the game when I've got to try to tie it up. Or extra innings, when I have to try to get us home. Oh, there's been a few times when I've done that. Sometimes it works out, sometimes it doesn't.

Killebrew: If the situation called for a long-ball, I would try to hit one, and many times I did. I've heard players say if they try to hit a home run, they can't—but I don't believe that. Maybe they're being modest.

Thomas: I'd probably say one or two swings a night. You get ahead in situations; it's more of a count thing. There are one or two swings a night you try it.

Are too many guys swinging for the fences at the expense of situational hitting?

Griffey: The public salivates over the long-ball. When I grew up, hitting the longball was fine, but the most important thing was to get the win. Everybody now is fascinated by the guy who can hit it 500 feet. But look back at the Big Red Machine. Let's go by the order: Pete Rose could bunt, Joe Morgan could bunt, my dad could bunt, Dave Concepcion could bunt, Cesar Geronimo. You had six out of the nine guys coming up to the plate who could manufacture runs. That's what it's about.

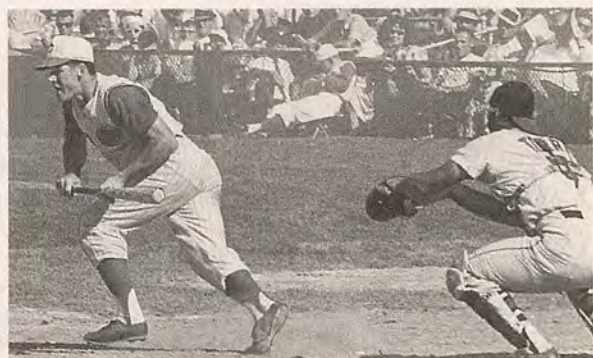
Killebrew: There are a lot of guys who shouldn't be trying to swing for the fences, but they are, and they'll end up hitting a lazy fly ball to right. What good does that do?

What will be your emotions when Bonds breaks the record?

Griffey: I'll be happy.

Thomas: I've got mixed emotions. I know what Hank Aaron went through. Barry, over the last year and a half, has gone through a lot, but he still hasn't gone through what Hank Aaron went through back in the day. ... There's been so much said over the last year and a half, and it looks like it's going to happen, so I guess we're all resigned to the fact that it's going to happen.

SN



SN ARCHIVES

Rose and the Reds proved a team could win with a bunt, too.



MARK CHRISTIAN / SN

The next big-hitting things

You know about Alex Rodriguez, Albert Pujols and Miguel Cabrera—sluggers who could, in time, challenge Barry Bonds' home run total. But what about the next wave of young power hitters? Remember these names:

Michael Burgess, OF, Hillsborough High (Tampa). Burgess was the 2006 Aflac high school player of the year and is a future first-round pick. He's the most recent star from Hillsborough, which also has produced Gary Sheffield, Dwight Gooden and Carl Everett, among others. Burgess is one of five players to clear the 35-foot batter's eye in center field at Ed Smith Stadium in Sarasota, Fla. The others: Ken Griffey, Frank Thomas, Bo Jackson and Jeremy Hermida.

Matt LaPorta, 1B, University of Florida. The Gators' senior slugger is healthy after he was slowed by an oblique injury last season, and he's hammering SEC pitchers. He has 19 homers, 10 of which came in a seven-game stretch capped by a pair of 3-run blasts against then-No. 1 Florida State. La Porta has 73 in his career, 18 more than the previous record holder, Rangers outfielder Brad Wilkerson.

Kyle Russell, OF, University of Texas. The Longhorns have won six College World Series titles but never have had a slugger like Russell, a lanky sophomore who lassoed the school's single-season record of 20 home runs in mid-April and sits at 27 heading into this week's Big 12 Tournament.

Evan Longoria, 3B, Class AA Montgomery (Devil Rays). He was widely regarded as the best pure hitter in the 2006 draft, and, if anything, he has exceeded expectations with his power production. He hit 18 homers at three levels in half a season last year and has 10 this season with the Biscuits.

Brandon Wood, 3B, Class AAA Salt Lake (Angels). He set the Angels' minor league record with 43 home runs in 2005, then hit 15 more in the Arizona Fall League and as a member of Team USA. Two brief stints with the big league club this season provided a glimpse of his ability. —Ryan Fagan



AP

What Aaron touched on when he touched 'em all

Thirty-three years ago, as Hank Aaron tied and then broke the most hallowed record in American sports, SPORTING NEWS was there—just as we were when Babe Ruth was hitting his 714 home runs a half-century before.

SPORTING NEWS, April 20, 1974

"That (No. 714) took the edge off. If we could have won, I would have felt like celebrating. If we had won, I would have popped open the champagne and we would have had a little celebration in the clubhouse."

"I'll be glad to get this all behind me. I like the exposure, naturally. I'm getting a kick out of it, but I don't like the fact it is overshadowing the performances of such fine players as Dusty Baker, Ralph Garr, Dave Johnson and Darrell Evans. They had fine seasons last year, with some outstanding accomplishments, but nobody seemed to notice."

"Yeah, I feel like I'm sharing it. It's a great moment for me, for black kids, for every kid in America. It's not so much that I'm hung up on records. I feel if anyone came along to break my record, I'd certainly be pulling for him."

"I'm proud of my accomplishments. Not just the home runs, but the fact that of a dozen major offensive records, Ruth, Cobb and I hold all of them. With a good season, I could have six records. I'd like that."

"The last one is going to be my most important, not 714 or 715. That's the one I'm going to remember. That's the one that will mean the most to me."

Braves traveling secretary Donald Davidson: "His hat size never has changed."

Sizing up the sluggers

The longball took hold in the 1920s when George Herman "Babe" Ruth, one of the first players to look the part of a slugger, got hold of baseballs with unfathomable regularity. Ruth, a roly-poly sort as captured in most newsreels, was, in fact, a 6-2, 215-pound mountain of a man for his time period. His sidekick in power-hitting mayhem, Lou Gehrig, was another impressive specimen at 6-0, 200.

Of the major leagues' top 10 home run hitters from 1920 through 1929, only Ruth and Gehrig were at least 200 pounds. Two of the decade's prime mashers were sub-6-footers. Hack Wilson brought up the short end of the long-ball stick at 5-6, and three others stood at exactly 6-0.

Mel Ott (5-9, 170) and Earl Averill (5-9, 172) continued to prove emphatically that little guys still could turn on the ball and were among the majors' 10 best homer producers in the next decade. Ott benefited from his home park, the Polo Grounds (with its short distances down the lines), perhaps more than any player in baseball history.

Of course, that was then; this is now. Thanks largely to such factors as weight training, offseason conditioning programs and breakthroughs in nutrition, the size of players began to change markedly in the 1970s and '80s. Steroids upped the ante in the '90s, and today most of the game's big boppers come in big, bigger and bigger-yet packages: Alex Rodriguez, 6-3, 210; Albert Pujols, 6-3, 225; Ryan Howard and David Ortiz, 6-4, 230; Travis Hafner, 6-3, 240; Adam Dunn, 6-6, 240; Jim Thome, 6-4, 244; Prince Fielder, 6-0, 260; and Frank Thomas, 6-5, 275. And we're talking *listed* weights, which may vary from actual weights by who knows how much. —Joe Hoppel

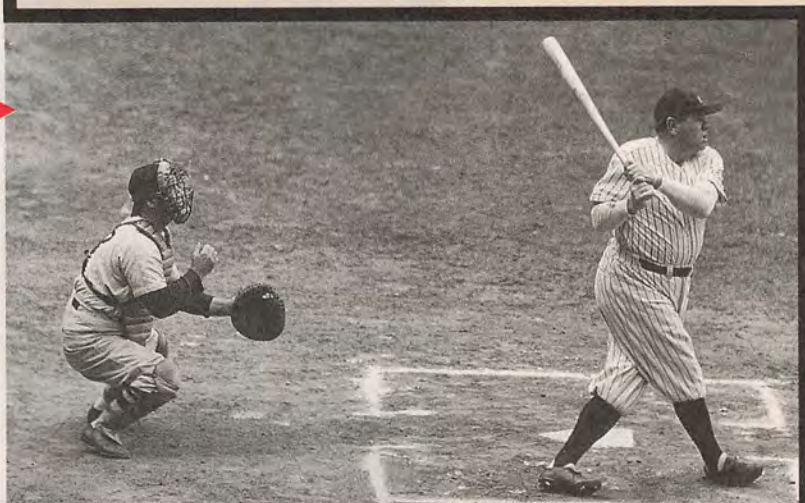
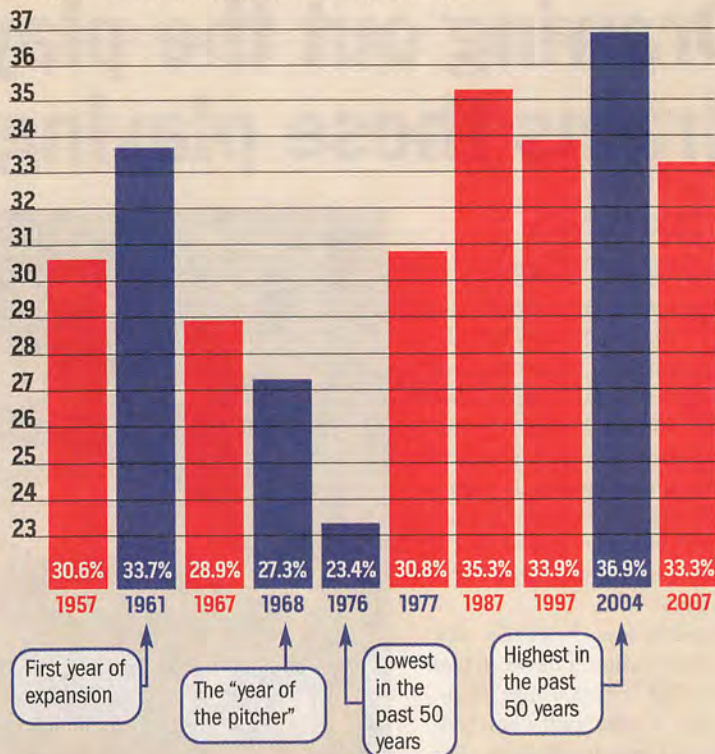
My, how they've grown

The evolution, size-wise, of the top 10 home run hitters:

Years	Sub-6-footers	Sub-200-pounds	Decade leader (HRs), size
1920-1929	2	8	Babe Ruth (467), 6-2/215
1930-1939	4	7	Jimmie Foxx (415), 5-11/195
1940-1949	4	6	Ted Williams (234), 6-3/205
1950-1959	3	5	Duke Snider (326), 6-1/190
1960-1969	2	5	Harmon Killebrew (393), 6-0/210
1970-1979	0	3	Willie Stargell (296), 6-3/225
1980-1989	0	1	Mike Schmidt (313), 6-2/200
1990-1999	0	0	Mark McGwire (405), 6-5/250
2000-2006	0	0	Alex Rodriguez (316), 6-3/210

Sit back and wait

Former Orioles manager Earl Weaver championed the 3-run homer four decades ago. He must be proud of baseball's increased reliance on producing offense via the longball, although the early-season returns this year show a change in course. A sampling of the percentage of runs scored via home runs the past 50 years:



SPORTING NEWS, April 27, 1974:

"I've read stories that I wasn't trying my last game in Cincinnati. I'd just like to say now that I have never stepped on a field and did not do my level best. I'm not directing this at anyone in particular, but when it is said you're a disgrace on the field, something has to be said."

"It (home run No. 715) wasn't one of my better ones. I hit it fairly good, though, and the wind helped to carry it. I was guessing. He (Al Downing) threw me fastballs the first time up, and I thought he'd start me that way next time and then go to breaking balls. But he threw the fastball again. He got it up a little bit, and I was fortunate enough to hit it."

"I just wanted to make sure I touched (the bases)."

"I'm happy it's over. I feel now I can relax, my teammates can relax and that I can go on and have a great year. This is something I wanted. For years, I feel I was slighted by awards and things like that. I worked very hard to get where I am, although I never thought five years ago I would ever be in this position. Now I can consider myself one of the best. Maybe not the best because a lot of great ones have played this game—DiMaggio, Mays, Jackie Robinson—but I think I can fit in there somewhere."

"The average person doesn't know what a nightmare this has been. All the same old questions, the controversy. I'll enjoy it all a little later."

C'mon, there's plenty of time to rest in the offseason.

Drawing out the playoffs drains those playing in them

By Stan McNeal

smcneal@sportingnews.com

Starting the World Series on a Wednesday isn't the problem. Who knows, maybe it will help baseball win that almighty TV ratings game even when the Yankees aren't around. Potentially ending the Series in November is not a big deal, either, because weather is as unpredictable on October 20 as November 1.

Nevertheless, baseball's new October schedule is the worst idea since *The Jerry Springer Show*. The No. 1 reason: off-days. Way, way too many off-days. The beauty of baseball rests largely on its everyday setup. From April through September, teams have about 18 days off, not including the three-day All-Star break. That works out to fewer than one day off per week.

Under the new schedule, a team could have up to 16 days off in the playoffs before the World Series even begins. A team that sweeps the first two rounds would play seven games in the first 23 days of October. Even if the Division Series and Championship Series go the distance, the teams advancing to the World Series would play 12 days and have 11 off. That's four more off-days than in the previous setup.

TV honchos may favor such an



More off-days could mean more of Santana during the playoffs.

get out there and play."

The Twins, it should be noted, would stand to benefit from the stretched-out schedule more than any club because they have the game's best pitcher, Johan Santana. With so many off-days, Santana could pick up an extra start or two. But Gardenhire says he remains a fan of ending the playoffs sooner rather than later.

Some of the off-days make less sense than others. One A.L. Division Series, for example, is scheduled to start on a Wednesday, take off Thursday, play Friday and travel on Saturday. The teams in that series will not play two straight days until the second week of the playoffs.

There's also an off-day between Games 4 and 5 in both League Championship Series, then a travel day after Game 5. It's almost as if baseball is planning for rainouts.

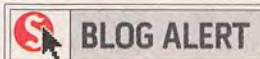
If the NLCS is a sweep, the pennant winner will have to wait nine days—the equivalent to three months worth of off-days during the regular season—for the World Series. Last year, a one-day break worked for the Cardinals.

One way to reduce this profusion of downtime in the new schedule would be to add a second wild card to each league's playoffs without extending their duration. Introduce a best-of-

three "play-in" round with the winner advancing to the Division Series. Though this would not be perfect—division winners would take five days off before opening the playoffs—it beats the new arrangement.

And this year, there might not be another way to see the Yankees playing in prime time come October.

SN



'The guardian of baseball inexplicably kidnapped my slider. Far and wide I searched, but to no avail.'

Will pitcher Garrett Broshuis ever find his slider? Follow his minor league escapades at sportingnews.com.

NBA-type schedule, but nobody else will, especially those on the field.

"The days off in the playoffs are just killers," says Twins manager Ron Gardenhire, who has taken his team to the postseason four times in the past five years. "The anxiety just tears you up. When one game ends, you just want to

Doug Melvin might be the first general manager to get this request: a player asking for a weekend off to attend his father's Hall of Fame induction. Brewers OF **Tony Gwynn Jr.** was reluctant to ask during spring training because he wasn't sure he was going to make the club. Once he secured his roster spot, he sought—and was granted—permission to take two days off in July to attend **Tony Sr.**'s big day in Cooperstown. ➤ With the club slumping, manager **Joe Torre** likes the energy **Melky Cabrera**, the Yankees' youngest and best defensive outfielder, brings to the lineup. But Cabrera did not make much of his opportunity last week. Starting in consecutive games, he struggled at the plate because of a lack of discipline. In a key at-bat against the White Sox, he swung at Strike 3 at his shoulders with one out and a runner on third. ➤ Dodgers SS **Rafael Furcal** heated up about the same time his left ankle healed up. He went 12-for-14 in an L.A. Dodgers first: three consecutive 4-hit games. ➤ White Sox manager **Ozzie Guillen** is not off to a good start handling the playing time of Cs **A.J. Pierzynski** and **Toby Hall**, who already has returned from a torn right labrum suffered in spring training. When a radio show host, after interviewing Pierzynski, said Hall was being rushed into the lineup, Guillen happened to be listening. He phoned the show and voiced his displeasure with a few words he should not have said with his children in the back seat. If G.M. **Ken Williams** isn't growing tired of Guillen's gaffes, he should be. ➤ When the Rangers become sellers—they could be soon because they have one of the majors' worst records—they could flood the market. CF **Kenny Lofton**, OF **Brad Wilkerson**, DH **Sammy Sosa**, RHP **Akinori Otsuka** and RHP **Eric Gagne** have one-year contractual obligations and are expendable.



INSIDE DISH

Guillen and Pierzynski likely boosted some ratings last week.

Considering the demand for relievers, Otsuka would bring the most in return. The Rangers' big

decision rests with 1B **Mark Teixeira**, who got off to another slow start in the power department. Just speculating, but Teixeira to the Tigers for one of their young starting pitchers makes sense. ➤ Brewers 2B **Rickie Weeks** could be bothered the rest of the season by his surgically repaired right wrist. The Brewers hope shutting him down for a few days when the wrist becomes too sensitive will keep him from needing a stint on the D.L. ➤ After Twins CF **Torii Hunter** hit a game-breaking grand slam in a victory against the Brewers, he said it wasn't even the biggest hit of the night for a member of the Twins' family. What was? The double by Class A SS **Toby Gardenhire**, son of manager **Ron Gardenhire**, that came off RHP **Roger Clemens** in Clemens' first minor league outing. "Toby's got a hit off Roger, and I don't," said Hunter, who is 0-for-22 with 13 strikeouts against the Rocket. "That's something he'll be able to tell his grandkids. I'm going to have to lie."

speedreads

Instead of vilifying Jason Giambi for admitting he used that "stuff", baseball should pat him on the back.

Hooray to the Twins, who are scheduled to break ground this week on an outdoor ballpark. But no retractable top? Hiss, hiss. Brrr, brrr. Zizz, zizz. (That's for the state bird of Minnesota: the mosquito.)

This one's for R-rated (and Mets minor league) rapper Lastings Milledge: Your time to shine is on the line because of your ludicrous rhymes.

Devil Rays-Rangers averaged 8,972 for a three-game set at Disney last week. Hardly impressive until you consider the same teams averaged only 7,221 at the Trop last May.

Roger Clemens to his agents: Do I have an escape clause?



Take a break from the Barry watch

As Barry Bonds chases 755, there's plenty of other stuff to look forward to happening—and not happening—in the next few weeks.

■ **The Dodgers will grab the National League's best record.** They don't have much power, but they're still scoring runs, and their rotation has been as deep as advertised. The bullpen has been even better. Closer Takashi Saito hasn't blown a save opportunity since last August. With an easier schedule, look for them to squeeze ahead of the Mets before the teams meet in mid-June.

■ **There won't be many changes in division leaders.** The first-place teams in every division but the A.L. Central appear to be there to stay. The Brewers can be thankful they built a seven-

game cushion before their bats went quiet as they hit a tough part of their schedule. They can be even more thankful they play in the N.L. Central.

■ **The Cardinals will continue to struggle.** Not even Albert Pujols can make a huge difference on a club that ranked 29th in runs and 25th in ERA entering the week.

■ **The Yankees won't get to .500.** That will take until Labor Day, assuming they find five healthy starters.

■ **Sammy Sosa will hit No. 600.** And nobody will notice.

■ **Jack Cust won't overtake Alex Rodriguez as A.L. MVP front-runner.** But with eight homers in 13 games, who cares? He's enjoying the ride of his life.



Fantasy Source

The D.I.Y. approach won't fix everything

By Chris Bahr

cbahr@sportingnews.com

When you decide to remodel your bathroom, you're faced with a tough choice. Do you pay someone to do the work for you, or do you work up the courage to tackle the job yourself? The do-it-yourself approach is cheaper, but it involves much more work and plenty of risk if you're not used to dealing with plumbing.

The same is true of roster repairs.

Every league has that go-to owner for trades. He's the guy who changes his roster more often than his underwear. He's always working on three trade proposals at once, regardless of whether he is in first place or fighting to stay out of the basement, and he's not afraid to trade a player he just acquired.

Conversely, each league also has the stubborn owner who refuses to rely on others for help.

The do-it-yourself managerial approach often stems from apprehensiveness. These owners have a hard time parting with players they fear will heat up the minute they're on



RICK SILVA / AP

There's a reason middle relievers such as Billingsley are on waivers.

The waiver wire isn't a bad stopgap, as long as you're looking for certain stat categories.

and make less of an impact.

Runs are usually cheap, too, and you can make small gains in batting average in daily transaction leagues by rotating hot hitters into your lineup.

But if you want to make up a lot of ground in steals and saves, you'll have to look further than the wire. And you're not going to find a 15-game winner there, either—at least not one who won't burn you in other statistical categories. Likewise, power bats aren't free for the taking. To add some pop, you'll have to bite the bullet and make a deal.

another roster. These owners prefer to scour the waiver wire for help and don't realize that a free agent—often a rival owner's reject—usually is just a stopgap.

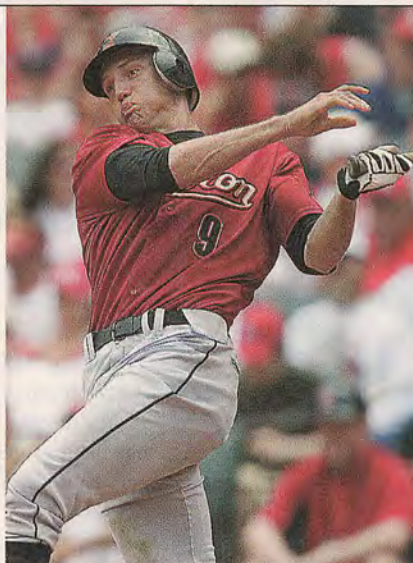
It isn't a bad idea to look to the waiver wire first, as long as you're looking for certain stat categories.

There are always plenty of decent middle relievers for the do-it-yourselfer searching for ERA or WHIP help. And adding a reliever with a solid K/9 ratio, such as Chad Billingsley, will boost your strikeout totals. Just don't expect miracles: Relievers pitch fewer innings than starters

FANTASY DISH

.356 with 16 RBIs through 19 games. ➤ OF **Carlos Beltran** has been dealing with a sore quadriceps, which helps explain why he didn't steal a base in his first 14 games in May. Teammate SS **Jose Reyes**, however, continues to swipe bases at a pace not seen this decade. If he keeps it up, he might crack triple digits. ➤ When you think of hitters parks, Toronto's Rogers Centre doesn't come to mind right away. But the Blue Jays' stadium ranks second in the majors in home runs this season. ➤ **Ryan Theriot** began the year as a reserve, but he has played in all but one of the Cubs' games. His batting average and speed potential have helped him find a spot in the lineup every day, either at second base or shortstop. —Rob Hurtt

Some teams don't seem to know how to handle top prospects, but the Astros took a patient approach with OF **Hunter Pence**—and it turned out to be productive. They chose not to call him up until he was ready for an everyday job, and entering the week he was hitting



ALBERT DICKSON / SN

The Astros waited for Pence to be ready; hopefully you weren't so patient.

BLOG ALERT

'An Eric Gagne appearance in his heyday was an event similar to a late-1990s Mark McGwire at-bat. But Gagne no longer is that guy.'

Brendan Roberts doesn't want your team gagging on Gagne. Read and heed at sportingnews.com.

A.L. EAST

BALTIMORE ORIOLES

The Orioles are taking a hard look at LHP **Garrett Olson**, the next in line among their high-profile pitching prospects. Olson, 23, has rebounded from a slow start at Class AAA Norfolk and eventually could join the Orioles' rotation. **HOT PROSPECT:** RHP **Jim Hoey** picked up nine saves and didn't allow a run in his first 14 games for Class AA Bowie. The Orioles want to take things slowly with Hoey, but if he continues to be dominant, he could spend much of the second half of the season providing late-innings depth for the big league club. —*Spencer Fordin*

TAMPA BAY DEVIL RAYS

Since the start of spring training, manager **Joe Maddon** has emphasized the need for 1B **Carlos Pena** to hit to the opposite field rather than to try to pull the ball. Pena hasn't perfected the approach, but it is paying dividends. His average has climbed steadily in the past month and is up to .307. **HOT PROSPECT:** RHP **Andy Sonnanstine**'s calling card is his control. In 52⅓ innings at Class AAA Durham, he has 57 strikeouts and nine walks. One club insider has likened Sonnanstine to Padres RHP **Greg Maddux**, who also can throw all his pitches for strikes. —*Bill Chastain*



Matsuzaka

BOSTON RED SOX

One reason for RHP **Daisuke Matsuzaka**'s recent surge could be that he has reverted to a more Japanese style of training. Earlier in the season, Matsuzaka was doing more lifting and less running; now he's doing the opposite and even has been doing cardio workouts hours before his starts. **HOT PROSPECT:** It won't be surprising if CF **Jacoby Ellsbury** sticks with Boston in 2008. Ellsbury, who recently was promoted to Class AAA, is a leadoff hitter with great speed. Scouts have called him a young CF **Johnny Damon**, though Ellsbury has yet to show much power. —*Ian Browne*

NEW YORK YANKEES

C **Jorge Posada**, 35, has plenty left in his bat. He entered the week with a .483 average in May and credits much of his success to an offseason training regimen that helped him get in great shape. Because backup **Wil Nieves** doesn't do much on offense, Posada may be the team's most indispensable player. **HOT PROSPECT:** RHP **Jeff Marquez** has used a sinker and changeup to overwhelm Class AA opponents; he's 5-2 with a 2.06 ERA in his first eight starts. With continued success, Marquez could be in line for a late-season call-up. —*Bryan Hoch*

TORONTO BLUE JAYS

Jason Smith was put on waivers, and the team will turn to **Ryan Roberts** to fill its utility role. Roberts is better on defense at third and second base, and he also can play left field. ... RHP **Jesse Litsch** has impressed manager **John Gibbons** with his polish and ability to throw strikes. Litsch is a candidate for a more permanent spot in the rotation. **HOT PROSPECT:** The Jays rushed LHP **David Purcey** to Class AAA Syracuse last year, but he has improved his mechanics at Class AA New Hampshire, where he was 3-1 with a 2.83 ERA in his first seven starts. —*Jordan Bastian*

A.L. CENTRAL

CHICAGO WHITE SOX

1B **Paul Konerko**'s average has been hovering around .200, but he says he doesn't feel lost at the plate. He thinks the hits will start coming soon. ... SS **Juan Uribe** still doesn't walk a lot, but he has curbed his free-swinging ways enough that he's being used in the No. 2 spot at times. **HOT PROSPECT:** LHP **Gio Gonzalez** is generously listed at 5-11, 185, but he is a power pitcher who can pile up strikeouts. His fastball hits the mid-90s, and he has a big-breaking curve. Gonzalez's ability to hit different spots in the strike zone is another reason he's on the fast track. —*Scott Merkin*

KANSAS CITY ROYALS

Angel Berroa, who was hitting .303 at Class AAA, took the roster spot of 1B **Ross Gload** (quadriceps) when Gload went on the D.L. Berroa will back up SS **Tony Pena** but will get some starts as the Royals try to showcase him to other teams. **HOT PROSPECT:** OF **Billy Butler** was sent to Class AAA after a 10-game stint with the big club, but he likely will be back soon. The club wants Butler, its top hitting prospect, to work on his plate discipline. He struck out seven times and walked only once, and he swung at bad pitches too often. —*Jim Molony*

CLEVELAND INDIANS

RHP **Rafael Betancourt**'s inconsistency largely can be explained by his failure to mix his pitches. When opponents know his fastball is coming, they hit him hard. ... 1B **Ryan Garko** has improved enough in the field that he likely will remain in the lineup regularly even after 3B **Andy Marte** comes off the D.L. and 1B/3B **Casey Blake** plays less at third. **HOT PROSPECT:** Class AA LHP **Chuck Lofgren** has one of the club's most promising arms. He struck out 46 in his first 44⅓ innings. The 6-4 Lofgren is a good athlete; he initially was an outfield prospect. —*Anthony Castrovine*

MINNESOTA TWINS

After a recent loss, 3B **Nick Punto** spent extra time in the batting cage with hitting coach **Joe Vavra**, who stressed the need for Punto to slap the ball and use his speed instead of hitting balls to the outfield. ... The team wants SS **Jason Bartlett** to put his speed to use by bunting more. **HOT PROSPECT:** RHP **Scott Baker** was called up last week to fill a spot in the rotation, and RHP **Kevin Slowey** might not be far behind. He entered the week with a 1.46 ERA and 44 strikeouts and just three walks. Some team officials say Slowey reminds them of **Brad Radke**. —*Kelly Thesier*

DETROIT TIGERS

With RHP **Joel Zumaya** (finger) out, **Bobby Seay** has been getting longer relief stints plus work as a lefty specialist. His breaking ball has gotten sharper, and his delivery is tough on lefthanders. **HOT PROSPECT:** RHP **Eulogio De La Cruz**'s 100-mph fastball earned him comparisons to Zumaya, but the organization moved De La Cruz to the rotation after he struggled with his command. The move forces him to pace himself and to focus more on location than velocity. De La Cruz has excelled at Class AA and could join Detroit's bullpen sometime this summer. —*Jason Beck*



Seay

THE CLOSER Todd Jones

Making a fan's day: life as a tour guide

One of the cool parts of my job is being able to get tickets for friends. Even cooler is when I can take them on the field before a game. That doesn't happen often, but I was able to show around a couple of guys—let's call them Dave and Dino—when the Tigers played at Boston last week.

Dino is a big Red Sox fan, to say the least. He was wearing a Red Sox necklace, shirt, jacket, hat and maybe even underwear. He played some college baseball, but that was it. So, like several million residents of New England, he bleeds Red Sox red.

Before we went on the field, I warned Dino to act like he had been there before. You know, like it was no big deal. I don't think he heard. We went out to the Green Monster, and I showed him the signature wall inside the scoreboard. When I turned to tell him to watch his head because of the low ceiling, he was scribbling his name on the wall. At that point, I knew it was better to just give him his time.

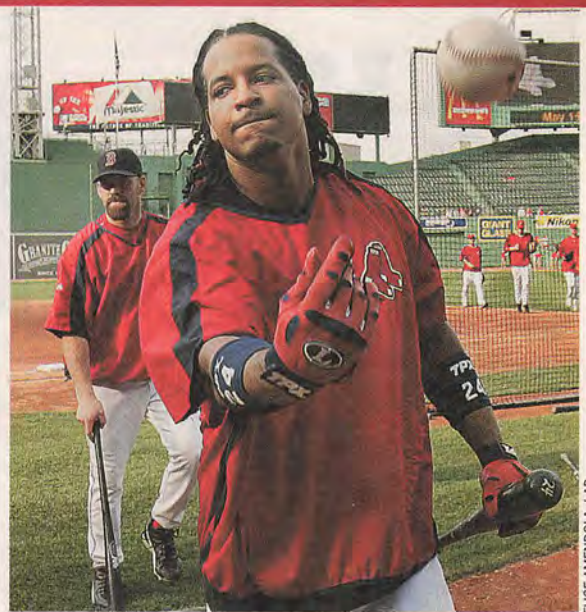
We walked around the outfield track and passed the Red Sox's bullpen, where Josh Beckett

was throwing. As Josh finished up, he glanced my way. One of the cool things about being old is that I've been teammates with at least one guy on every team in the big leagues. I was in Florida for a year with Josh, so we visited for a minute and then it happened. I introduced Dino to Josh. In front of my very eyes, I saw a grown man revert to his little league days. It was totally awesome. Josh was great about it, too.

Before long, Dino spotted Manny Ramirez. "OH MY GOSH, THERE'S MANNY!" I played with the Red Sox for half a season, so I know Manny a little, too.

I was feeling pretty good about myself after I introduced Dino to Manny. As the day went on, Dino rubbed shoulders with nearly all the Boston players. He even met Big Papi.

As players, we enjoy such opportunities. We get to hang out with greatness every day, so sometimes we forget how cool it is to be on a first-name basis with the superstars. To us,



ELISE AMENDOLA / AP

One lucky Red Sox fan got to see Manny up close and personal before a game at Fenway.

they're teammates or opponents, jerks or buddies. To some fans, they walk on water.

Dino was appreciative of his opportunity, and I was pleased to be able to show my friends around Fenway. Because Dino was there with Tigers tickets, he agreed not to boo us during the game. But notice, I didn't ask him to not cheer for his team.

E-mail Tigers reliever Todd Jones at tjones@sportingnews.com.

A.L. WEST

LOS ANGELES ANGELS

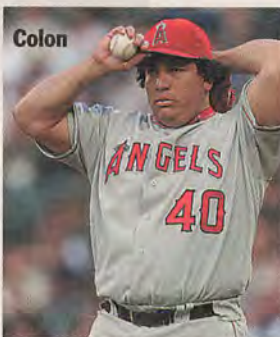
Since coming off the D.L., RHP **Bartolo Colon** has looked almost as good as when he won the 2005 A.L. Cy Young award. He's even winning when he doesn't have his best stuff; he's inducing ground balls by getting good sink on his fastball and mixing in quality complementary pitches.

HOT PROSPECT: CF **Nathan Haynes** has a .399 batting average, 29 RBIs and 13 stolen bases at Class AAA. He also is playing excellent defense. Haynes, 27, may be the fastest player in the organization. His path is blocked, however; the Angels' outfield is strong. —Lyle Spencer

SEATTLE MARINERS

The club will use newly acquired RHP **Jason Davis** in middle relief. Davis used to approach 100 mph on the radar gun, but he realized that speed isn't everything. He has better control and movement when his fastball is in the mid-90s. He still walks too many batters, though.

HOT PROSPECT: Class AAA Tacoma OF **Wladimir Balentien** is almost ready for the big leagues. With 10 home runs in his first 41 games and nine stolen bases in 10 attempts, Balentien has a blend of power and speed that no one in the team's farm system can match. —Jim Street



KEVIN P. CASEY / AP

OAKLAND ATHLETICS

With RHP **Huston Street** (elbow) on the D.L. and RHP **Justin Duchscherer** (hip) at less than full strength, the club will use a closer-by-committee approach for the time being. Duchscherer, RHP **Kiko Calero** and LHP **Alan Embree** are the primary options. **HOT PROSPECT:**

2B **Donnie Murphy** was hot in spring training and hasn't cooled off at Class AAA Sacramento, where he was hitting .348 before going on the D.L. with a strained biceps. Murphy, who played for the Royals in 2004 and '05, has good speed but strikes out a lot. —Mychael Urban

TEXAS RANGERS

Rookie 3B **Travis Metcalf** will get a chance to play every day in place of **Hank Blalock** (shoulder). Metcalf is an excellent fielder and is getting better as a hitter. ... Newly recalled **Kevin Mahar** adds a righthanded-hitting option in center field. Mahar has power and is improving at hitting the ball the other way. He has decent range and an above-average arm. **HOT PROSPECT:** Class AA SS **German Duran** is having a strong season. He is hitting .287 with seven homers and is improving against righthanders. His defense is a work in progress. —T.R. Sullivan

N.L. EAST

MLB.com

ATLANTA BRAVES

The Braves will keep rookie C **Jarrod Saltalamacchia** in the majors as a backup instead of letting him play every day in the minors. He'll also play at first base on occasion. His strong arm behind the plate and ability to switch hit are assets to the club. **HOT PROSPECT:** OF **Brandon Jones** has great range and a strong arm as a defender, and he's hitting for power at Class AA Mississippi. He could add needed speed to the Braves' lineup, but he likely won't be called up before September. —*Mark Bowman*



NEW YORK METS

Damion Easley has been hitting well while filling in for 2B **Jose Valentin** (knee). Like Valentin was last season, Easley has been surprisingly productive. His six home runs—in just 71 at-bats—rank second on the team. **HOT PROSPECT:** RHP **Mike Pelfrey** struggled with the big league club early this season, but he remains high on the team's prospect list. His fastball is heavy, and his slider and changeup have improved—by necessity—because he has abandoned his curve. Pelfrey misplaced the command of his fastball in his six starts with the Mets. —*Marty Noble*

PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES

Carlos Ruiz began the season splitting time with **Rod Barajas** but has become the everyday catcher. Ruiz is a greater threat at the plate—he entered the week hitting .274 to Barajas' .208—and has gotten better at calling a game. He has won the trust of LHP **Jamie Moyer** and RHP **Adam Eaton**. **HOT PROSPECT:** LHP **J.A. Happ** is doing some good things at Class AAA Ottawa. His deceptive delivery makes his fastball seem a few mph quicker. Happ needs to hone his control and do a better job pitching to contact. —*Ken Mandel*

FLORIDA MARLINS

RF **Jeremy Hermida** (knee) hit safely in his first seven games after missing the season's first six weeks. Instead of trying to make up for lost time, Hermida has found increased success with a relaxed, patient approach at the plate. **HOT PROSPECT:** RHP **Rick Vanden Hurk**, a native of the Netherlands, has a lively 93-mph fastball and a sweeping breaking ball. He has impressed the team with his composure. He had a short call-up early in the season, and when he consistently throws strikes, he will be back in the majors. —*Joe Frisaro*

Things you need to know about ... A's second baseman Mark Ellis

The sure-handed Ellis made two errors all last season and set a major league record for second basemen with a .997 fielding percentage. Last week, he made two errors on one play. Ellis remains a Gold Glove candidate, but those E's pushed his 2007 total to four.

Despite the record 2006 season, he didn't win a Gold Glove. "Mark Grudzielanek had a great year, and he made only (four) errors. I didn't hit very good (.249 average), and that might have something to do with it. Plus, I missed a month. There's a lot of things that go into the voting."

He still remembers error No. 2 last season. "It was sometime in August, at Texas. An easy ground ball by Gary Matthews, and I just kicked it. It bounced off my glove. I knew it had been a long time since I had made an error."

He's one of the all-time greats from South Dakota. If he stays healthy this season, Ellis will take over third place on the list of games played by players born in South Dakota. He'll trail only Terry Francona and Dave Collins. Ellis, 29, was born and raised in Rapid City. He already holds the home run record for South Dakotans with 42. That's in a career, not a season.

There's not much high school baseball back home. "We'd probably have a 10-game schedule because of the weather. We do have a really good American Legion program. The coach, Dave Ploof, has been there forever. (This is his 43rd season.) We played like a 70-game season, traveling to Minneapolis, Denver and North Dakota. Plus, we won the World Series in Oregon. It was almost like a minor league season."

From South Dakota, he landed in Gainesville, Fla. "Gary Henderson was a coach at Pepperdine when he started recruiting me at the Legion World Series. Then he left for Florida, and it was an easy decision for me to go there."

It's good to be a Gator. "When I was there, we had David Eckstein, Josh Fogg, Brad Wilkerson, David Ross and Ryan Shealy. We had some really good teams." —*Stan McNeal*



You'll see Ellis turning two a lot more than him messing up two.

SEE A DIFFERENT GAME

The Rangers have relied on aggressiveness and power at the plate for years, but first-year manager **Ron Washington** wants his hitters to be more selective and more aware of situational hitting. Thus far, it has been a tough sell. ... Look for Red Sox LHP **Jon Lester** to be a confident and effective pitcher once he returns from a minor league rehab assignment. Lester admits he didn't have the same finish on his fastball last season; he wonders if the cancer he was diagnosed with last August contributed to that. Lester also says his mechanics were off. ... Braves LHP **Chuck James** has regained deceptiveness on his pitches after raising his arm slot. With an improved release, James again is getting optimal movement on his changeup. ... Though Tigers RHP **Joel Zumaya** is expected to regain full strength in his surgically repaired finger, he'll need to regain the feel for his pitches after he returns, and that could be a challenge. Zumaya grips the ball tightly to produce torque. ... Pitchers have taken to working Reds rookie CF **Josh Hamilton** differently from at-bat to at-bat to keep him guessing. Hamilton, who was hospitalized last week with a stomach ailment, has remained patient at the plate. ... The Cubs want RHP **Jeff Samardzija** to throw a set number of changeups each game to help him develop the pitch. That approach makes some of his numbers at Class A Daytona—3.83 ERA, 53 hits in 40 innings—misleading. —*MLB.com correspondents*



ALBERT DICKSON / SN

When it comes to holding the baseball, Zumaya might need to loosen up a little.

N.L. CENTRAL

CHICAGO CUBS

Walks are becoming an issue for LHP **Rich Hill**. He allowed a total of seven in recent back-to-back starts—both losses. Teams also are taking advantage of his deliberate motion and running on him. The Cubs have modified his delivery from the stretch to speed him up a little, but it still is a work in progress. **HOT PROSPECT:** RHP **Rocky Cherry** impressed the team this spring with a 93-mph sinker and a tight slider, but he didn't have the same sharp stuff in his eight appearances with the Cubs. After he finds his groove at Class AAA, Cherry will be back in the bigs. —*Carrie Muskat*

MILWAUKEE BREWERS

Calls of "not again" were heard when RHP **Derrick Turnbow** suffered consecutive losses last week. The key to Turnbow's avoiding a second straight second half swoon is remaining confident in his slider, the needed complement to his hard fastball. **HOT PROSPECT:** The drums are beating for 3B **Ryan Braun**, who is hitting .333 with eight home runs and a .667 slugging percentage at Class AAA Nashville. 3Bs **Craig Counsell** and **Tony Graffanino** are struggling at the plate, and Braun has shown improvement on defense. He could get the call by mid-July. —*Adam McCalvy*

CINCINNATI REDS

Chad Moeller, recently called up from Class AAA, and struggling **David Ross** will share regular catching duties for now. **Javier Valentin** will go back to being the top left-handed pinch hitter. Manager **Jerry Narron** wants to be able to use Valentin earlier in games without the fear of running out of catchers. Narron and G.M. **Wayne Krivsky** have no issue with Valentin's defense. **HOT PROSPECT:** RHP **Richie Gardner** is on track again after surgery in 2005 to repair a torn labrum. A 5-1 start at Class A Sarasota earned him a promotion to Class AAA Louisville. —*Mark Sheldon*

PITTSBURGH PIRATES

1B **Adam LaRoche** seems to be regaining his stroke and is driving balls to the opposite field consistently. Even after watching video with manager **Jim Tracy** and hitting coach **Jeff Manto**, LaRoche can't find any glaring changes in his mechanics since last season. LaRoche believes his struggles are the result of taking a poor mental approach. **HOT PROSPECT:** RHP **John Van Benschoten** struggled in his first start of the season at Class AAA Indianapolis but then turned in six excellent outings. He's a top candidate to replace RHP **Tony Armas** as the No. 5 starter. —*Jennifer Langosch*

HOUSTON ASTROS

2B **Craig Biggio** is on pace to get his 3,000th hit in late June. The club is hoping he'll get the hit at home, which may require strategic planning. ... RHP **Jason Jennings** is almost ready to come off the D.L., and when he does, RHP **Matt Albers** probably will be demoted. Albers had a 6.51 ERA in his first six starts. **HOT PROSPECT:** RHP **Juan Gutierrez** is viewed as a future No. 2 or 3 starter. His fastball reaches 94 mph, and he has made progress on his slider, curveball and changeup at Class AAA this year. The Astros are impressed with his poise and ability to get ahead in the count. —*Alyson Footer*



ALBERT DICKSON / SN

ST. LOUIS CARDINALS

Manager **Tony La Russa** has little interest in bunting in the first inning despite the club's lack of early scoring. La Russa doesn't want to give the pitcher an out while he's settling in, and he doesn't want teams pitching around 1B **Albert Pujols**. ... RHP **Brad Thompson** has adapted well to being a starter. He's aggressive and is inducing ground balls. **HOT PROSPECT:** RHP **Chris Perez** has been overwhelming as Class AA Springfield's closer. He throws hard and has a nasty slider. He still has some control issues, however. Perez likely will be the first member of the club's 2006 draft class to reach the majors. —*Matthew Leach*

N.L. WEST

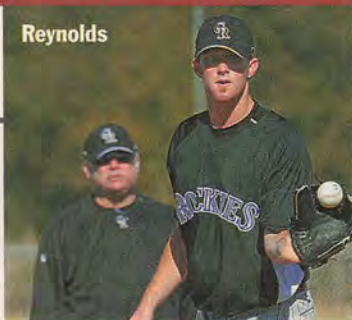
ARIZONA DIAMONDBACKS

Though RHP **Jose Valverde**'s antics can be over the top at times, he is doing a better job containing his emotions. He also has been more consistent by streamlining his repertoire. Valverde now throws just his fastball and split-finger. He has ditched his slider, which was inconsistent. **HOT PROSPECT:** OF **Justin Upton** was promoted to Class AA after dominating at Class A. Even more impressive than his gaudy numbers were the quality of his at-bats. Upton, who is an outstanding athlete, is taking better angles and looks more comfortable playing center field. —*Steve Gilbert*

SAN DIEGO PADRES

After a rough start, LHP **David Wells** is hitting his stride, thanks to his newfound ability to consistently command his curveball. ... A notoriously slow starter, CF **Mike Cameron** is beginning to pick up momentum. After hitting .192 in April, he hit .282 in the first 18 games of May. Cameron's power stroke still is missing. **HOT PROSPECT:** 3B **Chase Headley**, a switch hitter, is off to a great start for Class AA San Antonio; he's hitting .346 with 29 RBIs. He has impressed the Padres with his improved strength and the way the ball jumps off his bat. —*Corey Brock*

Reynolds



COLORADO ROCKIES

2B **Omar Quintanilla** has cut down on the looping swing that curtailed his chances of big league success in his call-ups in 2005 and '06. His improved hitting and **Jamey Carroll**'s seasonlong slump mean Quintanilla is getting most of the starts while **Kazuo Matsui** recovers from a back strain. **HOT PROSPECT:** RHP **Greg Reynolds**, the second overall pick of the 2006 draft, has a full complement of major league-quality pitches. He's in just his first full year in the minors, but it seems likely he'll finish the season in the majors. Reynolds has a 1.58 ERA at Class AA. —*Thomas Harding*

LOS ANGELES DODGERS

3B **Wilson Betemit** has gone from lost cause to one of the team's more reliable power hitters. He spotted a flaw in his stance, and the adjustment has him slugging the way he did last year. ... There's still no timetable, but the increase in workload for rehabbing RHP **Jason Schmidt** (shoulder) seems to indicate a return in early June. **HOT PROSPECT:** **Lucas May** is only at Class A, but the Dodgers are excited about his future. May moved from third base to catcher, and that hasn't negatively affected his hitting. He already has nine homers and 36 RBIs. —*Ken Gurnick*

SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS

LF **Barry Bonds** is seeing fewer and fewer strikes, and when he does get a pitch to hit, he often can't jump on it because his left knee is bothering him. Bonds has little protection, and with no big bats in the high minors ready to contribute, the Giants likely will have to trade from their surplus of pitchers to secure a capable hitter. **HOT PROSPECT:** Class AAA RF **Nate Schierholtz**'s doubles power makes him stand out in this punchless organization. He had 15 doubles in his first 39 games to go with four homers. Schierholtz also has worked hard on his defense. —*Chris Haft*

■ You're probably expecting great starting pitching, solid fielding and top-notch relief work from these A.L. contenders. Well, a two-game series between these teams in April featured 31 runs, 45 hits, two blown saves and eight errors. Angels and Tigers fans are correct to classify that kind of play as an anomaly. Conversely, Kansas City fans would be correct to refer to it as a sign of improvement.

■ Right when it appeared the Cubs were over their penny-pinching ways, Juan Pierre revealed that **Felix Pie** had been wearing his old jerseys—with the "rre" at the end of his name covered by Wite-Out.



■ Barring a shakeup in the Giants' rotation, Tim Lincecum will get a start. That means there's a chance he could face Julio Franco, who was in his second full major league season when Lincecum was born in 1984. Franco can educate Lincecum about such debates as **Reagan vs. Mondale**, VHS vs. Beta and the Pinta vs. the Santa Maria.

Dream week

May 24-30

THURSDAY, MAY 24

Angels at Tigers

FRIDAY, MAY 25

Cubs at Dodgers

SATURDAY, MAY 26

Blue Jays at Twins

SUNDAY, MAY 27

Nationals at Cardinals

MONDAY, MAY 28

Indians at Red Sox

TUESDAY, MAY 29

Giants at Mets

WEDNESDAY, MAY 30

Braves at Brewers



DAVID DURECHNIK FOR SN

■ Injuries and poor pitching have wreaked havoc on both so-called contenders' chances. The two biggest questions: Why did the Twins wait so long to send Sidney Ponson packing, and when will Jays manager **John Gibbons** finally challenge one of his players to a fight?

■ A year ago, Ryan Zimmerman was uncomfortable being called the next Scott Rolen. Imagine how he feels now.

■ Welcome back, **Trot Nixon**. After spending his entire career in the Red Sox organization, Nixon wasn't brought back for 2007 and signed with Cleveland. Expect a rousing ovation, which will trigger J.D. Drew's first D.L. stint (emotional distress).



JAY DROWNS / SN

■ Some Brewers fans have started Peeyourpantsthebrewers.com. If/when Milwaukee clinches a playoff spot, they'll ... well, you know. —*Chris Bahr*

Stern, baby, Stern

When he extinguished the Suns' title chances on a technicality—enjoy the ride, San Antonio!—the commissioner may have torched his league's relationship with many fans *By Sean Deveney*

'I am sick to my stomach. ... The NBA can't be taken seriously anymore.'—Socks22

Oh, they were not happy, the blog-o-maniacs, the mavens of the message boards. Still, by the time the Western Conference semifinals were over, with the Spurs moving past the Suns in six grueling games—all but one of which featured a close score and tense late-game moments—there was little time to reflect. Yes, San Antonio's series win over Phoenix made for compelling drama—13 days were packed with mudslinging, clawing, bruises, blood and, most memorably, suspensions, and it was widely agreed that the West champ, if not the NBA champ, would come from this series. But the league's schedulers left no opportunity for consideration of how lasting of an imprint the series had made on the league. "We play Utah in about three hours," Spurs guard Brent Barry joked.

It was more like 38 hours, but the Spurs did, indeed, tip off last Sunday afternoon in the West finals at home against the Jazz, a young team reaching the postseason's third round for the first time since 1998. The series features intriguing matchups throughout, starting with venerable coaches Jerry Sloan of the Jazz and Gregg Popovich of the Spurs, who



Did this ugly moment determine the NBA champion? Thanks to the league office, fans will never know for sure.

have 33 years of experience between them. It also pits two of the league's best power forwards, Tim Duncan and Carlos Boozer, against each other—a showdown that went decisively Duncan's way in the opener, as he scored easily over the smaller Boozer in the paint. With Duncan as their Game 1 anchor, the Spurs raced

to an 18-point halftime lead before cruising to an 8-point win. There seemed to be no ramifications from the energy-draining Phoenix series.

Unfortunately, over the coming weeks—and perhaps beyond—the league figures to feel the ramifications of its heavy-handed suspensions of Suns players Boris Diaw and Amare Stoudemire, who left the bench after a dust-up followed a

hard foul by Spurs forward Robert Horry on Suns guard Steve Nash in Game 4. Suspensions are automatic for players who leave the bench during an altercation, and commissioner David Stern insisted the league follow the letter of the law. Horry received a one-game suspension for the hit on Nash and another one-game suspension for a forearm to the Suns' Raja Bell. The Suns lost Game 5 by three points without Diaw and Stoudemire, which left fans to feel, at best, short-changed and, at worst, outraged.

'This is ridiculous. Way to turn one of the best playoff matchups in years into a farce. They can count on me not watching any more of these playoffs.'—Alechumes

This is where Stern may have made a huge miscalculation. He was following the rule, but the perception remains that he rewarded Horry for a cheap shot. Worse, this all took place after Stoudemire called into question the Spurs' style, bluntly saying, "I think the Spurs are a dirty team." Whatever the reality—whether the Spurs are dirty, clean or only slightly grubby—the perception remains that the playoffs have been tarnished, decided by men in suits in the New York office,

not by players on the floor. The Suns did little to dissuade fans of that notion. "It's tough not to think forever what might have happened if this stupid rule hadn't gotten in the way," Nash said.

That stupid rule will overshadow the rest of the postseason, and the league is likely to pay a hefty price when it comes to television ratings.

A full-body photograph of Tony Bruno, a bald man with a goatee, wearing a red basketball jersey with "SPORTING NEWS 00 RADIO" and an American flag patch. He is holding a basketball in his left hand. The background is a green, textured wall with ropes.

THE TONY BRUNO SHOW

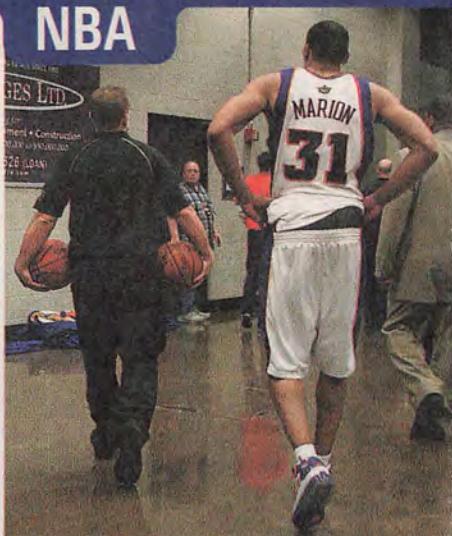
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DARRYL WEBB / AP

Remember the 2003 Finals, when ratings hit an all-time low? Next month's Finals figure to be in the same neighborhood, in part because would-be viewers now question the league's integrity.

'I haven't watched in a few years and actually was drawn in by (the conference semifinals) and was on my way back to watching. I'm done and won't return.' —Panther Pitt

This cloud, too, shall pass

Now what? The Suns have won 177 regular-season games the past three seasons and have led the league in scoring each year. But they have yet to reach The Finals.

The franchise has much to ponder. The first concern is money—the Suns stand to pay as much as \$12 million in luxury taxes next season, unless they move a player with a big contract (Kurt Thomas or Shawn Marion) and get little

salary in return. The second concern is chemistry, which unraveled a bit at the end of the season. The third concern is style. All that offense is fun to watch, but without playoff success, it's ultimately useless.

Just a day after Phoenix's season ended, coach and general manager Mike D'Antoni did not seem to be preparing for drastic moves. Remember, the Suns also have

encountered bad luck in the postseason each of those three years: an injury to Joe Johnson two years ago, Amare Stoudemire's injury last year and this year's controversial suspensions. So, even if the personnel changes slightly, we likely will see the Suns' scoring barrage again next year.

"If we're winning 30 games, we've got problems," D'Antoni told reporters. "We're winning 60. We're right there." —S.D.

This is of no concern whatsoever to the Spurs, who weren't—and shouldn't have been—making apologies for reaching the conference finals. Fact is, the team has the game's best postseason player, a guy who is, ironically, the NBA's Mr. Clean: Duncan. In Game 6 of the semifinals, he dominated the Suns by blocking a career-high nine shots. It's likely Duncan could have done the same had there been a Game 7. In the conference finals opener against the Jazz, Duncan held Boozer to 7-of-17 shooting, which is exactly why Boozer told reporters before the series, "He's probably the best post player we have in the game. ... What better challenge in basketball than to go up against Tim Duncan?"

Unfortunately, Boozer and Duncan are squaring off under a shadow. Boozer isn't the only one dealing with challenges leading up to The Finals—Stern is, too. **SN**

'Want to REALLY get their attention? Stay home. Don't buy the merchandise. Boycott games. Watch CBA and college. When the ratings go in the toilet, they'll fix it.' —Regulators98

There's reason for optimism in Cleveland regarding the Cavs' conference finals matchup against the Pistons: The Cavs took the Pistons to seven games in last year's conference semis, and Detroit absorbed a couple of body shots by the Bulls in the second round. But the Pistons' starting five is better, and their bench is deeper. If they can avoid the lulls that cost them a pair of games against Chicago—and contain SF **LeBron James**—the Pistons should be on their way to The Finals. ➤ The Cavs have to figure out how to guard Pistons PG **Chauncey Billups**. SG **Larry Hughes** has the length to affect Billups' outside shooting, but he won't be able to stop Billups from dribble penetration. So PG **Eric Snow** could get the nod. Billups is a master at exploiting mismatches, and there will be plenty of those in this series. He averaged 11.5 assists

against Cleveland in the regular season. ➤ What changed for the Jazz? After lackluster performances in the first two games of the first round against Houston, Utah has played with renewed fire. A Western Conference scout notes: "The Jazz are unflappable and deal great with adversity, and that comes from **Jerry Sloan**. They're physical and skilled, with legitimate stars in PF **Carlos Boozer** and PG **Deron Williams**. They're playing now like they did early in the season."



MEL EVANS / AP

The Pistons will try to do what the Nets couldn't: Get a handle on LeBron James.



The NASCAR summer schedule is long, hot and not for the faint of heart.

Gentlemen, start your endurance

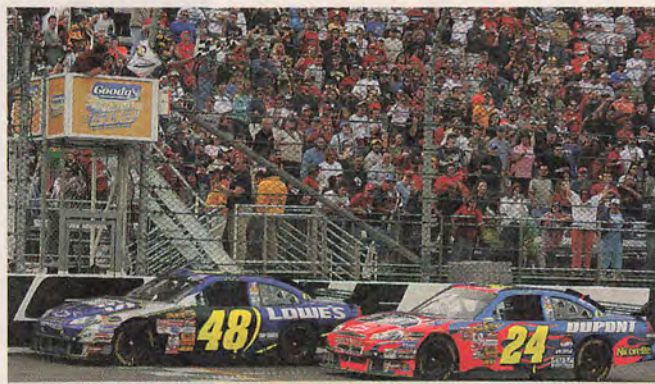
By Mike Hembree

The NASCAR calendar is so crowded, it's ridiculous. The schedule starts February 10 in Daytona Beach, Fla., and ends mercifully November 18 in Homestead, Fla., with only three off-weekends sprinkled in between.

The most difficult part of the schedule begins this weekend at Lowe's Motor Speedway in Concord, N.C. It's the unofficial start of NASCAR's long, hot summer—a stretch of 15 races in 16 weeks, with stops in places such as Dover, Del.; Sonoma, Calif.; Daytona Beach and the Irish Hills of Michigan.

The heart of the schedule ends September 8 in Richmond, Va., with the final race before—and the last chance to qualify for—the Chase for the NASCAR Nextel Cup.

Just 11 races into the season, several drivers seem to be locks for the championship run. With three wins and nine top five finishes, Jeff



Johnson and Gordon are right where they want to be heading into the summer stretch run.

Gordon is looking like his old dominant self. His teammate Jimmie Johnson has four wins and is on pace to break his season high of eight, set in 2004. Matt Kenseth, Denny Hamlin and Jeff Burton also have been fixtures in the top 10.

There are a dozen or so drivers in the next group, and it is probably out of this pack that the other Chase participants will emerge. A third of the way into the season, these drivers—including Tony Stewart and Kevin Harvick—have positioned themselves within striking distance, especially considering NASCAR expanded the Chase field to 12 this season.

If competitors who are hovering in the 18-25 range in points—such as Juan Pablo Montoya—don't make a serious charge soon, all hope is lost.

The difficulty of doing consistently well over the summer stretch is heightened not only by

its length but also by its breadth and its diversity. The 15-race stretch includes two road courses, two short tracks, the special challenges of Daytona and Indianapolis and the fast, high-banked mayhem that is Dover.

Additionally, the summer offers no relief in race length. The run starts with the Coca-Cola 600, a numbingly long race that

should be cut by 200 miles. Endurance is one thing; long-distance punishment simply for the right to use "600" instead of "500" is like watching *Oprah* and *Dr. Phil* over and over again—with the mother-in-law.

The two marathons at Pocono—held within eight weeks of each other in June and August—also could be trimmed significantly without much pain (except maybe for hot dog vendors).

Other pockmarks on the summer schedule are six Car of Tomorrow races, including a highly anticipated June 3 visit to Dover, where even "normal" racecars are difficult to plant on a fast track that tests

passing skills.

By the time autumn leaves begin turning in the Northeast and New Hampshire International Speedway kicks open its doors for the Chase opener, the survivors of the summer will be known.

SN

Mike Hembree is an associate editor for NASCAR Scene. Read more from Hembree at scenedaily.com



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| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DRIVING DISTANCE | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SAFE ACCELERATION | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PASSING |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> RIGHT OF WAY | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SEAT BELT USAGE | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> APPROPRIATE SPEED |

INSTRUCTOR COMMENTS:

- On file with Nashville officials for doing back flips off his car in the middle of the road (4/7/07)
- Feb. 2004, Daytona: Engaged in a racing contest with only three tires. After losing one, he continued at excessive speeds and slid onto the shoulder due to a lack of vehicle control.

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INSIDE DISH

Does the joint engine-building venture between Dale Earnhardt Inc. and Richard Childress Racing decrease the chances **Dale Earnhardt Jr.** will sign with Childress? Earnhardt says no. "We're still thinking about where we want to go and putting everything in a row and getting everything lined up," he says. The lines of communication, however, aren't exactly humming. **Richard Childress** says he hasn't spoken to Junior since the driver announced he would leave DEI at the end of the season. And has Junior spoken with DEI owner **Teresa Earnhardt**, his stepmother, since then? "I sure haven't," Earnhardt says. ➤ When **Bill Elliott** takes the wheel of the Wood Brothers' No. 21 Ford on Sunday, crew chief **Michael "Fatback" McSwain** will be calling the shots. Elliott will replace **Ken Schrader** on a race-to-race basis as the Wood Brothers try to move from 39th into the top 35 in the owner points standings. The Wood Brothers trail the 35th-place car in the series—the No. 25 Hendrick Motorsports Chevrolet driven by **Casey Mears**—by 163 points. ➤ **Kevin Harvick's** win in the All-Star Challenge marked the first trip to victory lane for the brand new Chevy engine. The two previous Chevy wins were with the old engine. ➤ The 100-point penalty levied against Earnhardt Jr. for illegal brackets could cost him a place in the Chase for the NASCAR Nextel Cup. The penalty dropped him out of the top 12, and crew chief **Tony Eury Jr.** was suspended for six races. The No. 8 team already was a far cry from the Hendrick Motorsports and Joe Gibbs Racing juggernauts. With Eury Jr. out, the team could be in deep trouble.



HAROLD HINSON FOR SN

In simpler times, Dale Jr. talked to Childress. You know, back before Junior left DEI and the rumor mill started spinning wild yarns aplenty.

Pit box

Fantasy experts Roger Kuznia and Vinnie Iyer pick Nextel Cup race winners.

Who will win at Lowe's?

Vinnie: When Lowe's decided to "build something together" with Jimmie Johnson, do you think it expected its eponymous speedway would become "The House That Jimmie Built"? Last season, Kasey Kahne cooled off the No. 48's run at Charlotte, which includes five wins in 11 career points races. This season, however, Kahne is cold, and Hendrick Motorsports is hot, hot, hot. Expect Johnson to deliver a Lowe's blow to the points lead of teammate Jeff Gordon.

Roger: Beyond Johnson, the most consistent performers at Lowe's the past several years have been those at Roush Fenway Racing. That's why I'm picking Carl Edwards to take care of business Sunday night. Edwards has finished in the top 10 in all four of his races at this track, including two third-place runs. He is starting to hit his stride, and the backflip will be back. Had he not had a pit road mishap at Darlington, he may have challenged for a win there.

- **Sleeper:** Brian Vickers.
- **Not so fast:** Kurt Busch.

- **Sleeper:** Scott Riggs.
- **Not so fast:** Elliott Sadler.

Nextel Cup points (based on how the experts' choices finished in points races): Vinnie 1,519; Roger, 1,447.

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Newman is (almost) back to the front

ALAN MARLER FOR SN

What has gotten into Ryan Newman?

On April 21, Newman left Phoenix International Raceway with a 38th-place finish that dropped him to 26th in the points standings.

The Rocket Man was challenging the apogee of obscurity.

But when Newman lines up for Sunday's Coca-Cola 600 at Lowe's Motor Speedway, he will be 13th in the points standings, 51 points out of 12th, the cutoff for the Chase for the NASCAR Nextel Cup.

How did Newman turn around his season in three races?

"We just finally got results," he says of finishes of fourth, sixth and ninth. "We've had good performances, and we've had great racecars. It's not the championship Chase right now. We're just working our way to it. We'll keep building on it."

Newman built his career on getting results, especially in his first four full Cup seasons—2002-05—when he won 12 races and 34 of his 38 career poles in 144 events and made the Chase twice. But Newman hasn't won since September 2005, a span of 56 races.

At least he's getting closer. His fourth-place finish at Darlington two weeks ago gave him three consecutive top 10s for the first time since last fall. The 39 laps he led were his most in 52 races.

His record at Lowe's is mixed. He has won five poles in 12 Cup races there and his average start is 4.5, but he is winless and his average finish is 20.1. He finished 35th in last year's 600.

"I'm real ready (to win)," Newman says. "We went from ninth to sixth to fourth, so it's going in the right direction. It's just a matter of time in my opinion." —Bill Marx



ALLEN MCILVAIN

Wood you do this?

This masterpiece cost Dover, Del., NASCAR fan Allen McIlvain four burned-out chainsaws and months of sweat and tears—hopefully no blood, though. Of course, now Dale Earnhardt Jr. is leaving the No. 8 at DEI, but if Junior jumps to Richard Childress Racing and takes his dad's old No. 3, all McIlvain will need is a few more swipes of chainsaw No. 5 to update his monument.

SPEED reads

The Coca-Cola 600 is sensationally long and sensationally boring. In the history of the race, the fastest time is 3 minutes, 5 seconds short of four stinking hours. If NASCAR wants a gimmicky race to compete with the Indy 500 on Memorial Day weekend, it should move the All-Star race there, give teams the previous week off and dump this unwatchably long event.



RUSTY BURROUGHS FOR SN

Driver in the top 12 who will not make the Chase: Clint Bowyer. Driver outside of the top 12 who will make the Chase: **Greg Biffle.**

With each race, the momentum builds for a change to NASCAR's qualifying system. Under the current policy, the top 35 in owners points automatically make every race, and everybody else fights for the final eight spots. Here's a wacky, crazy, thinking-outside-the-box suggestion: the fastest 43 cars make the race.

Ginn Racing is an intriguing candidate in the Dale Earnhardt Jr. sweepstakes. Reason why the company makes sense for Junior: Owner Bobby Ginn clearly is willing to spend what it takes to win—unlike Dale Earnhardt Inc. Reason why the company makes no sense for Junior: The team has zero race wins and zero championships.

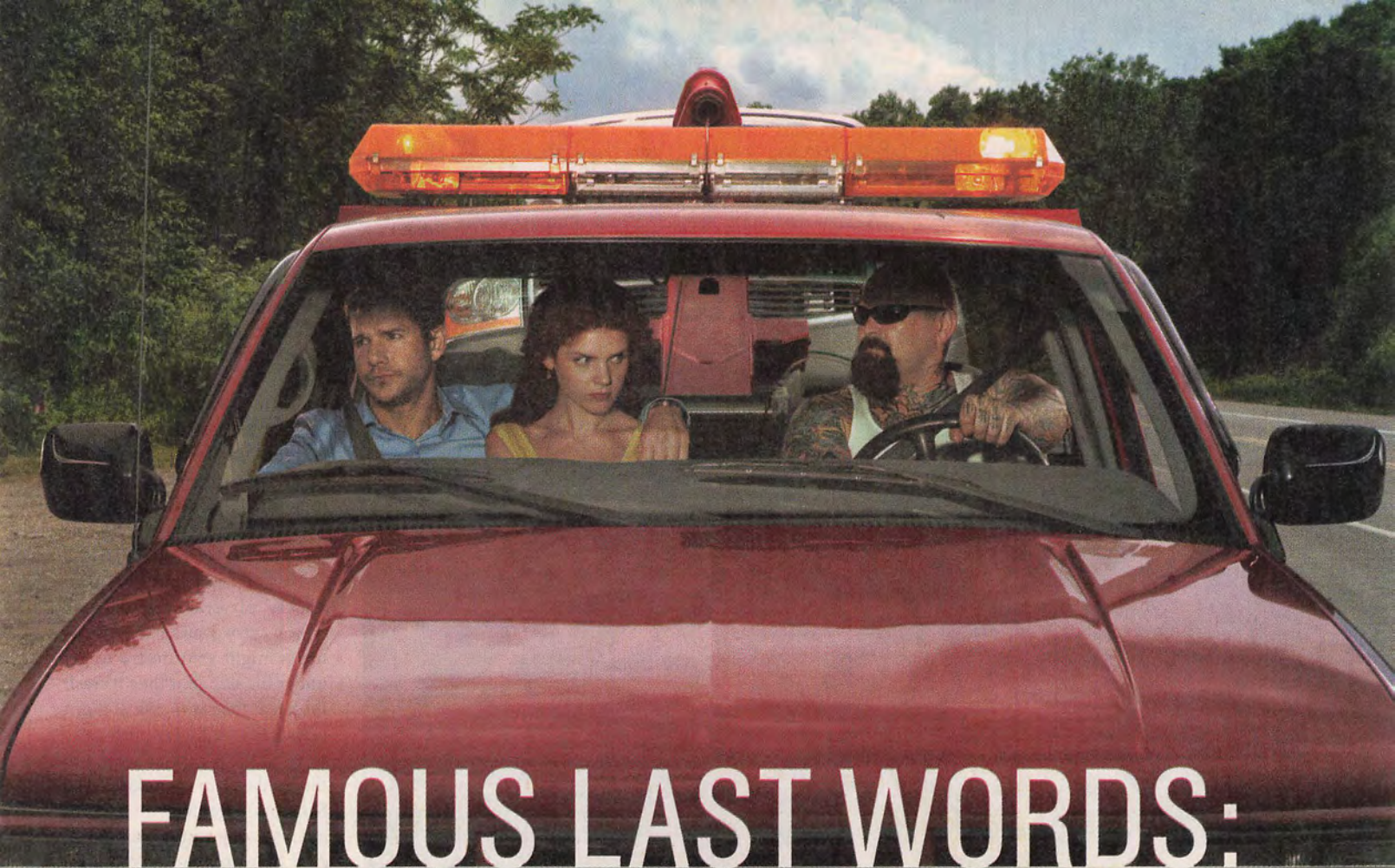
What do you, me and everybody in your phone book have in common? We still have more Nextel Cup points than Michael Waltrip.

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Ottawa goaltender Ray Emery—a blast behind the mask—has taken this job and shoved fun in our faces. That's not such a bad thing this time of year, now is it?

The Senator has the floor



Emery's antics make him something of a wild card, but he has come through for the Senators this postseason.

ELSA/AP/POOL

By Kara Yorio

kyorio@sportingnews.com

Ray Emery and the Ottawa Senators are going to the Stanley Cup finals.

Emery is the first goalie in franchise history not to let down the team when it mattered the most. He enters the finals with a 1.95 GAA and .919 save percentage, having faced an average of 25 shots per game. He hasn't been outstanding. He hasn't carried the Senators. He is not even among the top three Conn Smythe candidates on this team (hello Daniel Alfredsson, Jason Spezza and Dany Heatley). But Emery has given his team what it needed.

And now the 24-year-old Emery, in only his second full NHL season, brings a big personality—and some eye-catching suits—to the NHL's final series of the season. For those unfamiliar with Emery, here are some of the most



GENE J. PUSKAS / AP

memorable personality-highlighting moments of his brief NHL career.

■ Last season, he ate a cockroach on a \$500 bet with Alfredsson, dyed his hair blonde, showed up with a picture of Mike Tyson painted on his goalie mask and took newspaper

photographers with him to get a tattoo. (The organization made him change his hair color back and did not allow him to wear the Tyson mask.)

■ This season, he was suspended three games for slashing Canadiens forward Maxim Lapierre across the face. Emery returned to the ice in time to thoroughly enjoy throwing punches in an all-out brawl with the Sabres. He overslept during the team's second-round series against the Devils and got in an accident as he was racing to make the plane (which he missed). He drove an orange Lamborghini while his banged-up Hummer underwent repairs.

This is not your typical hockey player—or even your typical crazy goalie. Finals opponents might want to try to get under his skin, but they'll crash the net at their own risk. It is not unusual to see Emery push a guy or two, throw a quick punch to the head or trip up a player. The Senators' flamboyant goalie enjoys every jostle and shove. And he won't back away from the media, either.

Welcome to the Stanley Cup finals, Ray Emery. With you there, the championships should be as much fun off the ice as they are on. **SN**

speedreads

The U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame, which seemed destined to close permanently or at least be moved from Eveleth, Minn., will reopen this weekend. Credit USA Hockey with the save. The organization now will share control and handle the Hall's selections and induction ceremony. If you're anywhere near Eveleth this summer, stop by.

Good luck to Buffalo G.M. Darcy Regier in keeping his Sabres team together with key players—Chris Drury and Daniel Briere, to name two—set to become free agents. Buffalo was one of the most exciting teams to watch from October to April, but the absence of its prolific regular-season offense during the playoffs was astounding.

Rick Nash finally played to his potential. Unfortunately for the Blue Jackets, the talented and enigmatic winger dominated for Team Canada at the world championships, not for Team Columbus of the NHL.

A shame for the game

Commissioner Gary Bettman owes NHL fans a huge apology for the television package he negotiated, one which he continues to say benefits the game despite all evidence to the contrary.

NBC did not carry the overtime of Game 5 between the Sabres and Senators anywhere outside of Buffalo last Saturday. Instead, the network went to its prerace coverage for the Preakness Stakes. Immediately after a postregulation interview, viewers were alerted that the rest of the game would be seen on Versus (assuming fans' cable systems carried Versus). But nowhere during the Preakness coverage was there a graphic directing frustrated hockey fans who may have missed the original announcement. When studio host Bill Clement came on during a break, he simply said that overtime had begun and he would be back with an update when the game-ending goal was scored. He did not mention Versus.

When e-mailed for a comment on the situation, the league forwarded the request to NBC Sports director of communications Brian Walker.

"NBC was obligated to provide its traditional coverage of the Preakness," Walker wrote. "We protected the game in Buffalo and alerted viewers both verbally and graphically that overtime would be shown on Versus. We also directed viewers to NHL.com to find the specific channel in their area."

Walker ignored a follow-up question asking what specifically it meant to be "obligated" to provide the prerace fanfare in its entirety and why the network didn't have an obligation to the NHL and its viewers to show the playoff game in its entirety. (It would have been understandable to break in for the race if the game had gone into multiple overtimes, but it was a slap in the face to fans to have to find the game for that first overtime, and the switch shows exactly what NBC thinks of hockey.) Walker did, however, write that the verbal and graphic alerts were aired only once during the postregulation interview.

Now I love a feel-good story about a horse and his millionaire owners as much as the next person, but this was ridiculous. It was almost unimaginable. And the NHL should be embarrassed.



MARK AVERY / AP

The NHL suspended Ducks D **Chris Pronger** in attempt to administer justice, but the move simply spotlighted a missed call in the game. How did Pronger's teammate C **Rob Niedermayer** get ejected for the play, in which Pronger and Niedermayer collided with Red Wings LW **Tomas Holmstrom**, without Pronger's getting an in-game penalty? How is a suspension-worthy shot to the head not called at all during the game? The situation doesn't reflect well on the NHL.

The Lightning made a good move when it resigned G **Johan Holmqvist**, who would have become a free agent on July 1. Holmqvist took over the starting job in late December and played well enough to earn a shot at

being the starter for all of 2007-08. It also was a smart decision by both G.M. **Jay Feaster** and Holmqvist to make this a one-year deal. The Lightning can't be saddled with a goalie who might not follow through on promise showed in one season, and Holmqvist is smart to leave himself the option to go somewhere else if things don't work out with Tampa. ➤ So much for the 2007 rental market. Only one of the four teams in the conference finals had a big-name rental: the Red Wings, with their high-risk addition of RW **Todd Bertuzzi**. The rest of the headline players acquired at the trading deadline are at home mulling their pending free-agent status. Almost every team that made a big move for a big name—RW **Bill Guerin** (Sharks), LW **Keith Tkachuk** (Thrashers), LW **Ryan Smyth** (Islanders), C **Peter Forsberg** (Predators)—failed to get the desired result. Will that change what happens at next season's deadline? No. The lure of a top player is too great. But hopefully the market—which was sky-high this season—will sort itself out and come down



to a more reasonable level. ➤ During the season, speculation about a possible return to the league by **Brian Leetch** kept popping up in media reports. Maybe there was a team out there in need of

power-play help that would pull the former All-Star defenseman back into the league, particularly for a playoff run. It seemed like a ridiculous notion, a move that would reek of desperation. But looking at these playoffs, maybe luring back Leetch wouldn't have been such an ill-advised idea. The Sabres, for one, desperately needed power-play help and someone who could keep the puck in the zone at the point. (Not that G.M. **Darcy Regier** could have anticipated the meltdown of his power-play unit.) Even having sat out all season, it's likely Leetch, 39, could have helped a team in those areas. The move would have meant shortening the bench at even strength because Leetch wouldn't have had many minutes in him, but he also could have made a difference in a close series. ➤ The long list of Coyotes general manager candidates is down to three according to *The Arizona Republic*. The report says two of the men still in the running are Rangers assistant G.M. **Don Maloney** and Chicago Wolves (AHL) G.M. **Kevin Cheveldayoff**. Bruins assistant G.M. **Jeff Gorton** is the third candidate, according to TSN.ca.

In football, like in life, shorts aren't for everyone.

These rookies' careers just might have legs

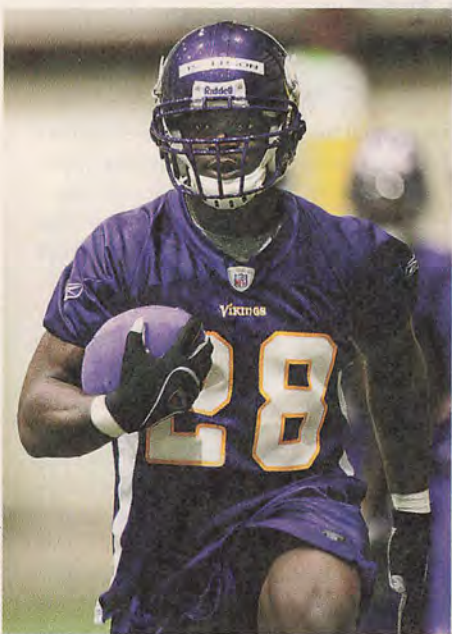
By Dennis Dillon

ddillon@sportingnews.com

First impressions are as important in football as they are on blind dates. So if you're going to show up in bermudas, you had better have engaging legs—or some other captivating quality.

By rule, the rookies who participated in their teams' recent minicamps were limited in their wardrobe. They couldn't wear pads, and contact was prohibited. But that didn't prevent several from rising to the occasion. Defensive linemen Turk McBride and Tank Tyler, for example, made coach Herm Edwards' all-shorts team for what they did during the Chiefs' minicamp.

Taking that concept across the league, we present our All-Shorts Team: 12 rookies who caught the attention of their teams.



ANN HEISENFELT / AP

Adrian Peterson, RB, Vikings. What popped out most were his receiving skills, which he rarely had a chance to display at Oklahoma. Running a lot of swing routes and checkdowns, Peterson wowed the Vikings with his ability to extend his arms and catch the ball.

Usama Young, CB, Saints. New Orleans may have landed another small-school gem. Young, a Kent State product, drew praise from coach Sean Payton after showing up in excellent shape and making good breaks on the ball. He intercepted one pass and broke up several others. Not bad for a guy who didn't get invited to the Scouting Combine.

Steve Smith, WR, Giants. He looked polished, ran good routes and made a leaping one-handed catch during a 7-on-7 drill. Just about what you'd expect from a prospect out of Southern California.

Trent Edwards, QB, Bills. Edwards exceeded the team's expectations in the windy conditions at Ralph Wilson Stadium. He showed a quick release and a strong arm—and he was accurate.

Adam Carriker, DT, Rams. He took most of his snaps inside and displayed the same characteristics—stoutness, hand explosiveness, ability to collapse the pocket—that made him the Big 12's defensive lineman of the year in 2006 as an end at Nebraska. The Rams are hoping Carriker will be able to play both the 3 technique and nose tackle positions. If he can, he will relieve a longtime headache for the team.

Buster Davis, LB, Cardinals. The 5-9 Davis was like a water bug, covering a lot of ground and making a lot of plays—just like he did at Florida State.

James Jones, WR, Packers. The third-round pick from San Jose State was quick and



BILL KOSTROUN / AP

explosive in and out of his cuts, and he plucked every pass thrown his direction.

Kevin Kolb, QB, Eagles. Donovan McNabb won't like hearing it, but Kolb showed a strong arm and mobility.

Mike Walker, WR, Jaguars. A third-round pick from Central Florida, Walker did enough good things to elicit positive reactions from coach Jack Del Rio and quarterback Byron Leftwich.

Scott Chandler, TE, Chargers. Chandler, a 6-7 target, regularly got open down the seam and on corner routes.

Johnny Baldwin, LB, Lions. A fifth-round pick from Alabama A&M—and another player whose invitation to the Combine got lost in the mail—Baldwin worked out at middle linebacker. He displayed what defensive coaches desire most in their players—speed.



TONY TRIBBLE / AP

Kenny Irons, RB, Bengals. He impressed coach Marvin Lewis with his cutting ability on the field and his resolve off it. After missing his flight to Cincinnati, Irons flew to Dayton, arranged his own transportation and arrived at the Bengals' complex in time for a mandatory team meeting.

SN



'It's up to Brett Favre to forget his frustration and be a calm, collected leader for an otherwise very young team. That will help more than being a prolific downfield passer.'

Vinnie Iyer says the Pack won't get back without an attitude adjustment from Favre. Join the frettin' about Brett at sportingnews.com.

INSIDE DISH

The Giants are switching **Mathias Kiwanuka** from end to outside linebacker because they want to put their best 11 defensive players on the field. They hope they can take advantage of Kiwanuka's pass-rushing ability by making him an every-down player. Kiwanuka wouldn't have had that opportunity if he had continued to play behind **Michael Strahan** and **Osi Umenyiora**. > Dolphins coach **Cam Cameron** raised some eyebrows when he fired running backs coach **Bobby Williams** in late April and replaced him with **Bobby Jackson**. That's an unusual time to make a staff change. Although Cameron and Jackson have a history—they were assistants on the Redskins' staff from 1994 to '96—Jackson had been out of football since retiring from the Rams after the 2002 season. But there may have been other factors that came into play. Williams was one of former Dolphins coach Nick Saban's guys; he coached under Saban at Michigan State and LSU and was one of the last holdovers on Saban's Dolphins staff. Also, RB **Ronnie Brown** admitted he showed up for the start of the team's offseason program weighing 246 pounds, 14 more than his listed weight last season, and that couldn't have made Cameron happy. > Eagles coordinator **Jim Johnson** is impressed with



JOHN DUINN FOR SN

After coordinator **Brian Schottenheimer** and quarterback **Chad Pennington**, no one knows the Jets' offense better than versatile **Brad Smith**, who has stepped up in the team's offseason program. In addition to working on his strength and conditioning, Smith has been attending the quarterback, running back and wide receiver meetings as he tries to find his niche in Schottenheimer's flexible offense.

the progress DT **Brodrick Bunkley** has shown this offseason. "He's around here every day, and he's attentive, picking things up and working hard," Johnson says. Bunkley, who had an underwhelming rookie season after being drafted 14th overall in 2006, worked with the starting unit during minicamp. > Over the past three years, the Ravens' **Jarret Johnson** has evolved from an undersized hand-on-the-ground lineman into a versatile, standup linebacker. Johnson is expected to start at outside linebacker in Baltimore's base defense, but look for him to assume several of the roles versatile **Adalius Thomas** used to play. Although Johnson was a backup last season, he played almost 50 percent of the snaps. > After signing free-agent DTs **Michael Myers** and **Kenderick Allen** this offseason, the Bengals apparently felt **Sam Adams** was expendable, so they cut him last week. But one AFC scout doesn't think Myers or Allen can be as good a run stopper as

Adams, who will turn 34 in a few weeks. "I don't think either of those guys can do what Sam did," says the scout. Cincinnati also drafted a defensive tackle, Oregon's **Matt Toeaina**, in the sixth round. > The Chiefs have an eclectic mix of players competing at fullback. **Kris Wilson**, a tight end by trade who finished the 2006 season as the team's fullback after **Ronnie Cruz** was lost to injury, currently is listed as the starter. Two other players could see time there: **Boomer Grigsby**, a former linebacker who has been converted to fullback, and fifth-round draft pick **Kolby Smith**, who was a running back at Louisville.

speedreads

Don't blame Alan Faneca for being upset about his contract. If you were the second-best player in the league at your position and saw guards such as Derrick Dockery and Eric Steinbach getting long-term deals with guarantees of \$18 million and \$17 million, you'd be miffed, too. That said, Faneca needs to swallow his pride, play out the final year of his contract with the Steelers at his customary high level, then shoot for a big payday next offseason.

Assuming Ricky Williams ever gets reinstated by the NFL, there's only one word that would describe why a team would sign him: desperation.

Terrell Owens says he got "nothing" out of his one season in Dallas under Bill Parcells. Julius Jones says he felt like he was running "like a robot" at times and suggested the coach may have controlled him too much. It's a wonder Parcells was able to walk away from all that love.

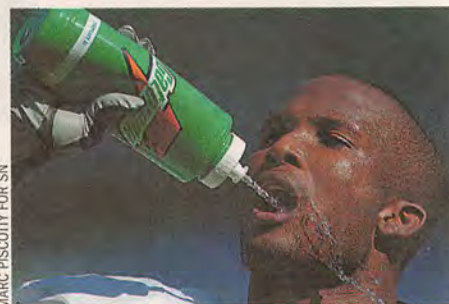
No raining on this minicamp

At a time of the year when other teams will be vacationing, the Broncos will be focused on football. They will hold their mandatory minicamp July 9-11—the third year in a row it has been held after the Fourth of July.

The Broncos used to have minicamp in May, two weeks after the draft. But the weather in Denver is so unpredictable then, it became a crapshoot. In 2004, three consecutive days of rain mixed with snow forced the Broncos to herd 80 players into a public indoor facility that had only one field.

There also are nonweather-related advantages to holding minicamp so late. It allows the rookies and other young players maximum time to learn during offseason workouts and ostensibly peak during minicamp. And with Denver's training camp set to open July 27, the players won't have much time to forget their assignments or regress in their conditioning.

"I think it's really smart," a personnel man from another AFC team says of the Broncos' minicamp philosophy.



MARC PISCOTTY FOR SN

Champ Bailey and the Broncos will be thirsting for a vacation by the time their minicamp ends.

Diminishing returns

Players who excel at running back kicks are electrifying performers, but it usually doesn't take long for them to lose their juice

By Michael Bradley

Hey, Dante Hall. You've been in the NFL for seven years. You'll be 29 this September. And you recently were traded from Kansas City to St. Louis. Do you think Chiefs coach Herm Edwards was telling you something? Yeah, you scored on returns in four straight games in 2003. But now those legs have a lot of miles on them.

Come on, Dante. Admit it. You're slipping.

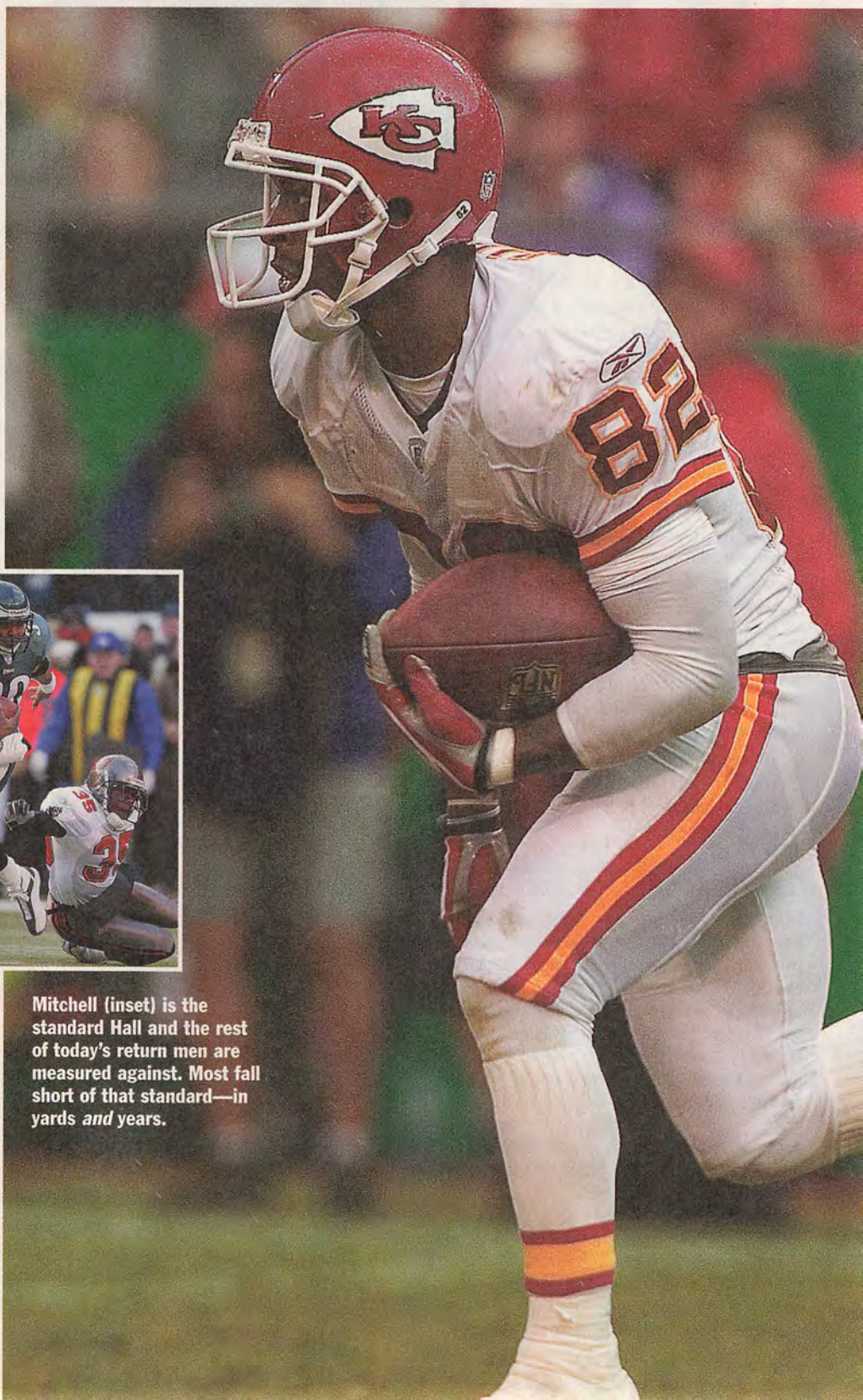
"I know I got it," Hall says, defiantly. "I think I got it. I feel I got it. (Edwards) told me I got it. I just think (the trade) was more personal than due to my skills."

"I definitely got it."

Spoken like a true return man—never backing down. Hall plans to give the Rams a big jolt. And, boy, do they need it. Last season, they were 26th in the league bringing back kickoffs (21.3-yard average) and tied for 24th returning punts (7.8). Hall can beat those averages. No problem.

Well, maybe the Dante Hall of 2002-04 could. Truth be told, he has averaged 7.5 yards on punt returns since then. And his kickoff numbers have fallen each of the past four seasons, to 22.8 in 2006. History tells us you need more than supreme confidence to overcome the ravages of time spent bringing back kicks.

The shelf life of a return man is not long. We're talking fresh produce, not canned goods. For every Brian Mitchell, who returned kicks and punts for 14 seasons, there are hundreds of others who lasted just a couple years. Teams may



BOB LEVERONE / SN

Mitchell (inset) is the standard Hall and the rest of today's return men are measured against. Most fall short of that standard—in yards and years.

be trying to find the next Devin Hester, who as a rookie returned six kicks for touchdowns, including the postseason. But considering the turnover among return men, it's fair to wonder how quickly the Bears will be looking for their next Hester.

Dolphins fans booed their team's decision to

'To play at such a high speed at your position and then try to make a big play in special teams is tiring. These guys are indispensable, and you don't want to put them out there too much.'

choose Ohio State's Ted Ginn last month because they knew spending the ninth overall pick on someone who could be primarily a return specialist was shortsighted. If Ginn doesn't turn out to be a front-line receiver, he might have a brief career.

Some return men can't hack it. Others don't want to stick with it. Many more fall prey to a variety of factors that push them out of the position. Since 1970, only 12 players have led their conference more than once in yards per punt return. Only three have topped the AFC or NFC in kickoff return average multiple times.

"Special teams are all about want," Hall says. "There's technique involved. There's scheme involved. But for a good return man, you've got to keep running it up in there. You've got to have want-to."

JOB HOPPING

Mitchell never considered himself too important for the return game. "I was a small-town guy, just a hard-working country guy from Louisiana," he says. "It never got in my head that I was supposed to do something else." But most players come into the league hoping to be full-time performers on offense or defense. If returning kicks and punts is their ticket to a roster spot as a young player, fine. Down the road, they want more.

Panthers receiver Steve Smith is the perfect example. He led the NFC with a 25.6-yard average on kick returns as a rookie in 2001 and was a dangerous punt returner. But he caught only 10 passes that season. As Smith has emerged as a star receiver, his role as a return man has diminished. He has returned only five kickoffs over the past three seasons and fielded only 12 punts in 2006.

Eagles running back Brian Westbrook hasn't been a full-time return man since 2003. Redskins receiver Santana Moss hasn't brought back punts regularly since '04. Both moved from special teams weapon to offensive stalwart.

"Sometimes, it's hard for return men to find a full-time position," Ravens special teams coach Frank Gansz says. "But if they become real players at running back or receiver, you don't want them to return kicks. Look at Derrick Mason. He was a heck of a return man with Tennessee, and now he's our No. 1 receiver."

Teams aren't just afraid that one of their top players will get pummeled by a coverage maniac; they also are worried about fatigue. Though Hall disputes this, his statistical decline the past few years could have been caused by his increased use as a receiver.

"You can get worn out playing your butt off on offense or defense," Bucs special teams coach Richard Bisaccia says. "To play at such a high speed at your position and then try to make a big

play in special teams is tiring. These guys are indispensable, and you don't want to put them out there too much."

BODY BLOWS

When Mitchell played with the Redskins, Eagles and Giants, he weighed anywhere from 209 to 225 pounds. He was an option quarterback in college at Louisiana-Lafayette and also played running back in the NFL, so he was used to taking hits. "I didn't dance to avoid contact," Mitchell says. "I would feed my shoulder pads to people."

Hall is listed at only 5-8, 187, but he played running back at Texas A&M and got accustomed to regularly getting hit by bigger guys. Many return men don't get used to that, nor do they have the body control to avoid hits or the savvy to know when to cut their losses.

"I'm the master of knowing when to take the hit and when not to take the hit," Hall says. "If four or five guys are coming at you, step out of bounds. Running backs do it."

A return man who takes a few too many hits tends to lose focus and becomes more susceptible to turnovers. Coaches can tolerate poor return averages, but when someone starts dropping the ball, there's trouble.

"Bobby Jackson, my running backs coach with the Redskins, always said, 'Ball security is job security,'" Mitchell says.

Gansz says reliability often gets overlooked when return men are analyzed, and he points to the yards B.J. Sams saves the Ravens just with his ability to make tough catches on punts.

"I tell him that if the ball hits the ground, we lose field position," says Gansz. "You can't take chances."

OLDER MEANS SLOWER

There's no denying age robs players of speed. It may be only a tenth of a second in the 40, but slower is slower. Once you lose that burst, you lose confidence. That can lead to mistakes—and the loss of a job.

"As the years go on, you get into a position where you think you have to make a big play," Bisaccia says. "That might hinder your decision-making process. You might catch the ball on the 2-yard line. Or you might fumble. One mistake leads to another."

These days, Hall relies more on film work and on studying the tendencies of punters and coverage units than he used to. He can't count on simply blazing past defenders, so he has to use quickness and vision.

"I don't have to be the fastest guy," he says. "I just have to be as fast as I need to be."

Spoken like a true veteran. Let's hope that doesn't mean Hall is heading toward the end of his return career.

SN

AFC

FOCUS ON

1 RAVENS Ray Lewis and Bart Scott communicate well on the inside. Terrell Suggs always has been a force as an outside pass rusher, but now he plays the run well, too. Jarret Johnson is strong against the run.

2 CHARGERS It's difficult to imagine two better outside pass rushers on the same team than Shawne Merriman and Shaun Phillips. The inside is new, with Matt Wilhelm replacing Donnie Edwards and Stephen Cooper taking over for Randall Godfrey.

3 DOLPHINS Joey Porter is a big addition on the outside, but the unit's strongest spot is the middle, where Zach Thomas continues to play at a Pro Bowl level. With Channing Crowder developing on the weak side, this group could be a huge difference-maker in the team's success.

4 PATRIOTS Adding Adalius Thomas to a mix that includes the cerebral Tedy Bruschi and Mike Vrabel in the middle, as well as solid pass rusher Rosevelt Colvin, makes the starting four formidable. The expected return of Junior Seau will provide badly needed depth.

5 CHIEFS Derrick Johnson, Donnie Edwards and middle linebacker Napoleon Harris fit well in the cover 2. Kendrell Bell is the top backup and will have a role as a rusher in passing situations.

TOP 5

1. Shawne Merriman, Chargers.

Merriman has outstanding speed and plays violently. He clearly is the most dominant pass rusher in the game.

2. Adalius Thomas, Patriots. Thomas is big and physical and has rare versatility. The Patriots will move him around to create mismatches all over the field.

3. Zach Thomas, Dolphins. Thomas is 33, but he has a nonstop motor and great instincts.

4. Ray Lewis, Ravens. He still can carry the defense at times, and he makes his teammates better with his rare leadership skills.

5. Keith Bulluck, Titans. His power, athleticism and mean streak give him the ability to take over a game.



ROBERT SEALE / SN ARCHIVES

6 BRONCOS D.J. Williams must prove he can be instinctive in the middle. Ian Gold may be the fastest outside linebacker in the league. Warrick Holdman, the other likely starter, isn't a star but always is around the ball.

7 JAGUARS Mike Peterson is one of the league's top five middle linebackers. Outside starters Clint Ingram and Daryl Smith are young but proven.

8 TITANS Keith Bulluck and David Thornton tackle well and can match up against running backs and tight ends in coverage. Stephen Tulloch is battling Ryan Fowler to start in the middle.

9 TEXANS The team upgraded in the off-season by acquiring Danny Clark and Shawn Barber. They will compete with Shantee Orr on the outside. In the middle, DeMeco Ryans is the defense's unquestioned leader.

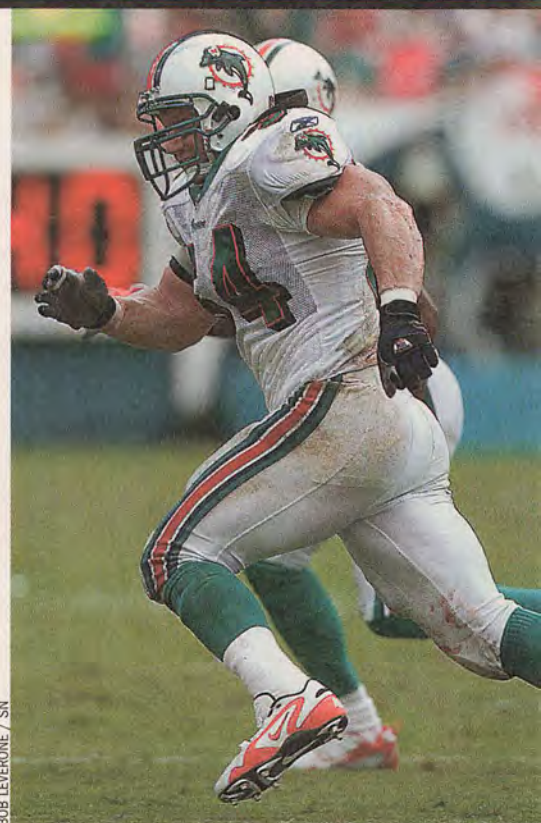
10 RAIDERS Kirk Morrison anchors the middle. Thomas Howard made an immediate impact as a rookie. Injury-prone Sam Williams still is trying to settle into a comfort zone.

11 STEELERS Clark Haggans is solid on the left side, but James Harrison must fill Joey Porter's shoes on the right. On the inside, James Farrior is the team's best linebacker, and Larry Foote plays well when he has a good supporting cast.

12 JETS They are set on the outside with Bryan Thomas and Victor Hobson. On the inside, undersized Jonathan Vilma has struggled in the 3-4, and Eric Barton will be challenged by second-round pick David Harris.

13 BROWNS Kamerion Wimbley and D'Qwell Jackson more than lived up to expectations as rookie starters. Willie McGinest is slipping, but he'll join Wimbley and Antwan Peek in a rotation on the outside. Andra Davis will start alongside Jackson in the middle.

CORRESPONDENTS: Baltimore, Mike Preston; Buffalo, Allen Wilson; Cincinnati, Chick Ludwig; Cleveland, Steve Doerschuk; Denver, Lee Rasizer; Houston, Megan Manfull; Indianapolis, Mike Chappell; Jacksonville, Michael C. Wright; Kansas City, Adam Teicher; Miami, Jeff Darlington; New England, John Tomase; New York, Rich Cimini; Oakland, Steve Corkran; Pittsburgh, Gerry Dulac; San Diego, Kevin Acee; Tennessee, Jim Wyatt.



BOB LEVERONE / SN

Thomas may have a lot of mileage on those wheels, but his motor never stops.

14 BENGALS If newcomer Ed Hartwell can stay healthy, he will take on a leadership role for middleman Ahmad Brooks and Rashad Jeanty. This unit has talent but lacks experience playing together.

15 COLTS Gary Brackett returns as the inside starter, and Rob Morris likely will open camp as the strongside starter. The rest of the cast is unproven. Freddy Keiaho is the leading candidate to replace Cato June on the weak side.

16 BILLS Angelo Crowell, Keith Ellison and rookie Paul Posluszny fit well in the team's cover 2 because they run well and attack the line of scrimmage. Still, there is no star here.

LINEBACKERS

1 BEARS Brian Urlacher remains the most athletic middle linebacker in the game. He and Lance Briggs are the league's best two-some, and Hunter Hillenmeyer is a smart two-down player.

2 SEAHAWKS Lofa Tatupu, who mans the middle, and Julian Peterson are two of the league's best linebackers. Leroy Hill could put the position over the top if he builds on his strong finish last season.

3 COWBOYS DeMarcus Ware is a star on the right side. Akin Ayodele and Bradie James make few mental mistakes on the inside. Greg Ellis probably will start on the left side while Anthony Spencer transitions into a starter.

4 BUCCANEERS Like fellow starters Derrick Brooks and Barrett Ruud, Cato June is a perfect fit in the Bucs' scheme. All are very fast and can both cover and offer run support.

5 49ERS Derek Smith and Brandon Moore form a tough, aggressive inside duo. Rookie Patrick Willis figures to push Smith for playing time. The 49ers are quicker and stronger on the outside with the acquisition of Tully Banta-Cain and the development of Manny Lawson.

6 PACKERS A.J. Hawk and Nick Barnett have to start making some game-changing plays, which were few and far between last year. Brady Poppinga is on the strong side for now.

7 FALCONS Demorrio Williams, Keith Brooking and Michael Boley make up a solid unit. Brooking will benefit from being moved to the middle permanently. Rookie Stephen Nicholas will help on the weak side.

8 VIKINGS E.J. Henderson moves back to the middle after two seasons on the weak side, where Chad Greenway will play. Ben Leber is steady and one of the team's better pass rushers from the outside.

9 REDSKINS Marcus Washington and middle linebacker London Fletcher-Baker could start for any team in the league. Rocky

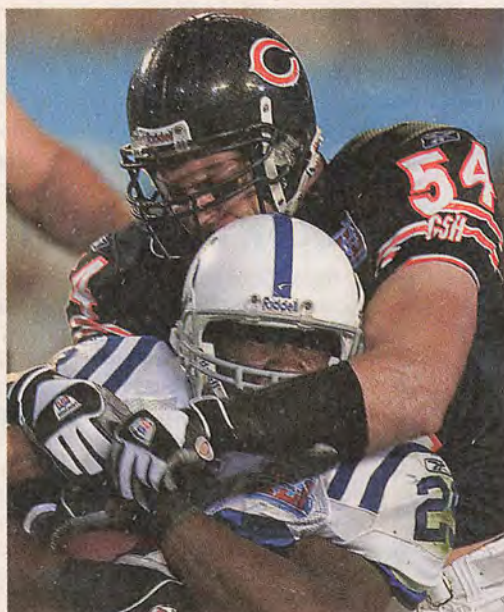
McIntosh is a work in progress. Lemar Marshall can play inside or outside.

10 SAINTS Scott Fujita, Mark Simoneau and Scott Shanle are consistent contributors but aren't dynamic athletes. Free-agent pickup Brian Simmons likely will replace Simoneau as the starter in the middle.

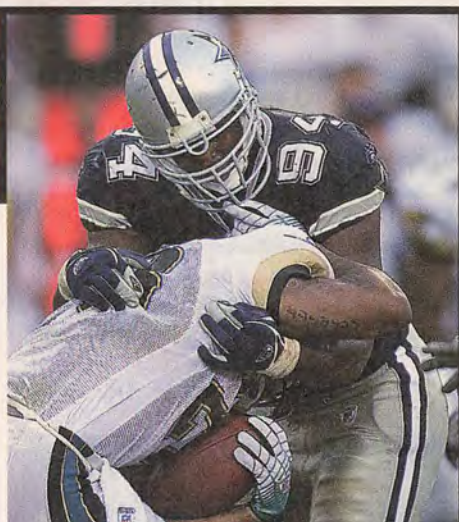
11 RAMS The club has decided to keep Will Witherspoon in the middle. Pisa Tinoisamoa must show he can stay healthy on the weak side, and Brandon Chillar is solid on the strong side.

12 PANTHERS When Dan Morgan is on the field, this group can be very good. Rookie Jon Beason will be ready to slide into the middle if anything happens to Morgan; otherwise, he'll be on the weak side. The coaches believe Thomas Davis is ready for a breakout season.

13 GIANTS Antonio Pierce is terrific in the middle. Beyond that, this unit is a mess. Mathias Kiwanuka is a converted end. On the weak side, the Giants are hoping Gerris Wilkinson or Kawika Mitchell will step up.



Opponents: Beware the Urlacher bear hug.



ALBERT DICKSON / SN

TOP 5

1. Brian Urlacher, Bears. He is asked to do many different things in the middle of the cover 2 and is always around the ball.

2. DeMarcus Ware, Cowboys. He is emerging as one of the top young defensive stars in the game, and his best football is still in front of him.

3. Lofa Tatupu, Seahawks. He does not look impressive in pads, but he is a natural leader who makes plays all over the field.

4. Julian Peterson, Seahawks. His tremendous closing speed and rare first step as a pass rusher make him a game-changer.

5. Lance Briggs, Bears. Though he plays in Urlacher's shadow, he is nearly on par in terms of ability.

14 EAGLES The team believes it improved one of its weakest areas by trading for Takeo Spikes, drafting Stewart Bradley, getting Chris Gocong back from injured reserve and releasing Dhani Jones. Jeremiah Trotter will remain a stalwart in the middle.

15 CARDINALS The talent is there, but Chike Okeafor and Bertrand Berry are moving from end and are bound to struggle. Inside, Gerald Hayes is a stout run defender, and Karlos Dansby gives the team another playmaker.

16 LIONS Ernie Sims has the potential to be an impact player on the weak side. Paris Lenon (middle) and Boss Bailey are solid.

CORRESPONDENTS: Arizona, Kent Somers; Atlanta, D. Orlando Ledbetter; Carolina, Pat Yasinskas; Chicago, Brad Biggs; Dallas, Jean-Jacques Taylor; Detroit, Tom Kowalski; Green Bay, Tom Silverstein; Minnesota, Kevin Seifert; New Orleans, Mike Triplett; New York, Ralph Vacchiano; Philadelphia, Mark Eckel; St. Louis, Jim Thomas; San Francisco, Dennis Georgatos; Seattle, Mike Sando; Tampa Bay, Roy Cummings; Washington, Paul Woody.

BOB LEVERONE / SN

NFL INSIDE THE AFC

The **BRONCOS'** D.J. Williams, who is moving to middle linebacker from the outside, is trying to get comfortable adjusting to the new angles he'll take to the ball and the different gap reads. Williams has broken down tape of the Dolphins' Zach Thomas and the Packers' Nick Barnett, who also have played middle linebacker for coordinator Jim Bates. ... Look for **CHIEFS** rookie K Justin Medlock to beat out Lawrence Tynes, whose miss of a 23-yard attempt in the playoffs underscored his inconsistency last season.

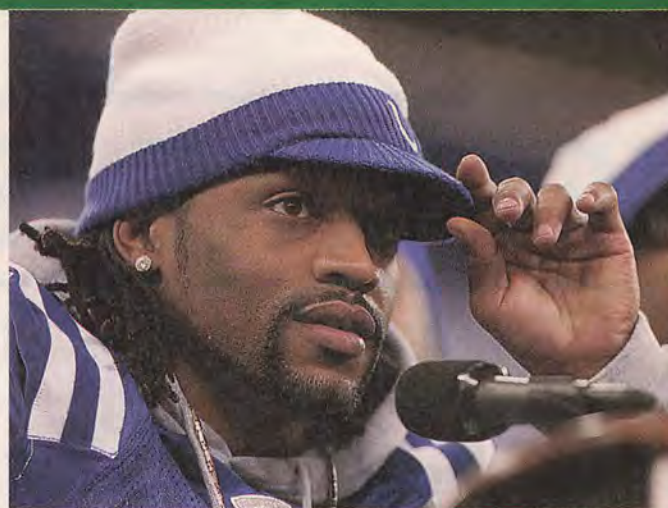


ROBERT SEALE / SN ARCHIVES

Medlock has a strong leg but must prove he can kick in adverse weather and show he has mental toughness. ... **RAVENS** OLB Dan Cody, who has missed most of the past two seasons with knee injuries, will give the pass rush a boost,

assuming he stays healthy. He has good speed and has improved at using his hands. ...

TEXANS RB Ron Dayne is healthy and in shape and hungers for more than just a few carries each week behind Ahman Green. If Dayne performs as he did last December, when he churned out yards with his physical running style, it will be hard for the team not to split carries between the backs. ... **STEELERS** RG Kendall Simmons will benefit from playing under new line coach Larry Zierlein, who favors power blocking. Simmons has a good punch and is explosive at the point of attack but has problems when he has to pull and read the defense. ... **CHARGERS** CB Drayton Florence is focused and appears stronger, which will allow him to be more physical with receivers. He is one of the fastest players on the team but needs to be more consistent and make more plays. He dropped several sure interceptions last season. ... **COLTS'** SS Bob Sanders didn't participate in the recent minicamp as he recovers from minor shoulder surgery but is expected to be ready for training camp. His health is critical to the defense because it feeds off Sanders' aggressive, physical play. He has missed 24 of 48 career regular-season games. ... **RAIDERS** DT Warren Sapp created a stir by reporting to minicamp at 285 pounds, a stunning 49 pounds lighter than last season. The added quickness allowed him to blow past blockers in drills. Still, look for Sapp to



JAY DROWNS / SN

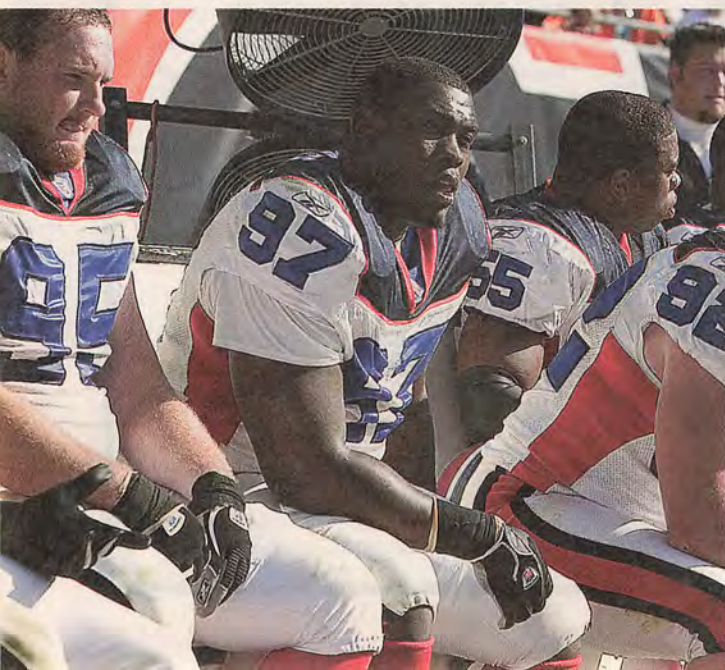
If Sanders spends a lot of time answering questions about his health, the Colts will be in trouble this season.

put 15 or so pounds back on so he doesn't wear down. ... It's becoming increasingly unlikely that WR David Givens (knee) will help the **TITANS** this season. That puts more pressure on the team's young wideouts, particularly Brandon Jones, who is projected to be the No. 1 target but must be more consistent in every phase of his game. ... **PATRIOTS** RE Jarvis Green excels as a pass-rush specialist by using swim, rip, spin and bull-rush moves. He also can play inside in the 4-3 and fight through guards and centers to get to the quarterback. ... **JAGUARS** rookie WR John Broussard has shown better hands than advertised; he catches the ball away from his body and can haul in difficult throws. His speed could be utilized on deep throws as the team plans to make better use of QB Byron Leftwich's strong arm. ... **DOLPHINS** QB Daunte Culpepper (knee) practiced in pads—and looked mobile doing so—nearly three weeks earlier than expected. That likely won't affect the team's desire to acquire Chiefs QB Trent Green, but it could improve Culpepper's trade value.

YOUTH MOVEMENT

Travis Wilson barely played as a rookie but has a good chance to be the **BROWNS'** No. 3 receiver. He has nice size (6-2, 213) and above-average speed and is working this offseason to improve his hand position, route running and downfield blocking. ... Rookie SS Marvin White should bring a more physical identity to the **BENGALS'** secondary. He is an aggressive run defender, a sound wrapup tackler and a nasty hitter. He too often gets caught out of position in coverage and is stiff in his backpedal, but his speed and athleticism allow him to recover. White could push Dexter Jackson this season and is expected to start in 2008. ... The **JETS** raised some eyebrows on draft day by trading up 16 spots in Round 2 to pick David Harris. Usually, a team makes that kind of move for a player at a high-impact position such as quarterback, not for an inside linebacker. The Jets' thought process: Not only will Harris challenge for one of the inside linebacker jobs right away, but he could become the leader of the defense if ILB Jonathan Vilma is traded after the season. Harris (6-2, 239) is a smart, hard-working player and has the size and run-stuffing mentality to fit the system. ...

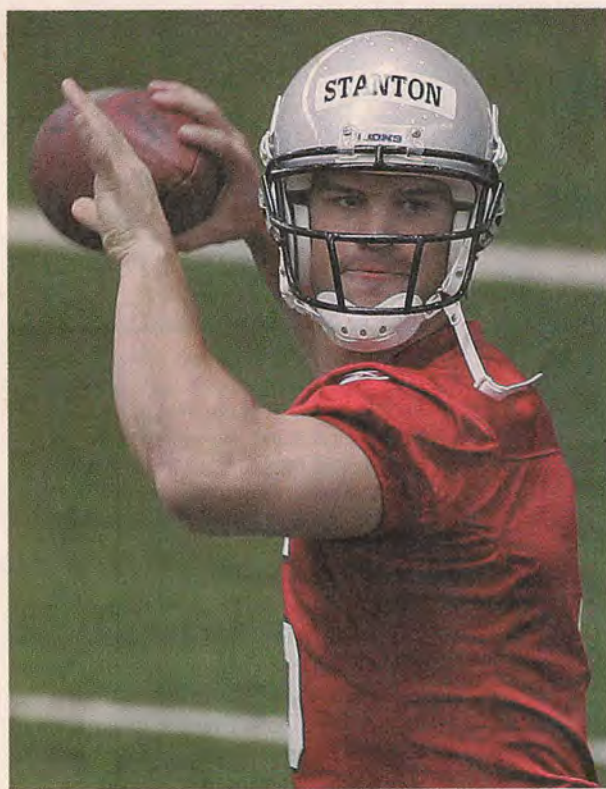
BILLS DT John McCargo was beginning to come on when a broken foot ended his rookie season in the team's fifth game. He's a terrific athlete who is quick off the snap and pursues the ball well. He's working this offseason on getting stronger, improving his technique and playing with better leverage. He's a natural 3 technique guy—a player who lines up on the outside shoulder of a guard and tries to get upfield—but the team hopes he can handle playing nose tackle.



JAY DROWNS / SN

McCargo (97) had to sit for much of last season, but he figures to stand tall in 2007.

INSIDE THE NFC



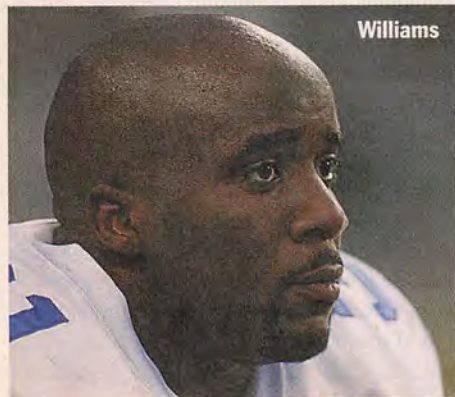
PAUL SANCIA / AP

Stanton did more learning than throwing at minicamp, but the Lions will see what he has in that right arm soon enough.

Rookie QB **Drew Stanton** didn't take any reps in team drills during the **LIONS'** recent minicamp. Coordinator **Mike Martz** threw a ton of information at the offense and didn't want Stanton to lose confidence. But Martz expects Stanton to become fully versed in the offense and share snaps with No. 2 **Dan Orlovsky** at training camp. ... DT **Ryan Sims**, recently acquired from the Chiefs, reported to the **BUCCANEERS** weighing 330 pounds, about 10 to 15 more than they would like. The team thinks Sims' best attribute is his quickness, but that's being compromised by excess baggage. He is projected to be the backup to NT **Chris Hovan**. ... Undrafted rookie QB **Tyler Palko** has caught the eye of

SAINTS coach **Sean Payton**. Palko was inconsistent in college and, at 6-1, lacks ideal height—but so does starter **Drew Brees**. Payton loves Palko's football IQ and passion for the game. ... After a strong offseason of strength and conditioning, **REDSKINS** DT **Anthony Montgomery** could be a solid contributor. He is big (6-5, 305) but was not sturdy at the point of attack last year. Montgomery needs to work on keeping his pads low, improving his hand placement and playing each snap with intensity. ... Because the **49ERS** want to reduce the load on RB **Frank Gore**, RB **Michael Robinson** will have an opportunity to become a bigger part of the offense. A college quarterback, Robinson is working on running lower and getting a better sense of how to read his blocking. He is quick and explosive and has a good work ethic. ... The **EAGLES** know they can get a pass rush

from second-year SLB **Chris Gocong**, who was an end in college, but they also need him to show he can cover tight ends. Gocong is an intelligent player who has picked up **Jim Johnson's** complicated defenses. ... Even with the addition of RB **Adrian Peterson**, **Mewelde Moore** figures to play a key role for the **VIKINGS**. The team's best receiver out of the backfield, Moore has good hands and open-field running ability. Those skills are critical to the team's West Coast attack. ... **SEAHAWKS** LG **Rob Sims** did enough at the end of last season to be counted on as a starter this season. A former college tackle, he is a powerful run blocker whose deficiencies in pass protection aren't as obvious inside. ... The **COWBOYS** are experimenting with SS **Roy Williams** at linebacker in the dime defense. The team continues to look for ways to keep Williams close to the line, where his strengths, such as blitzing, can be emphasized. ... Not only are the **PACKERS** trying to keep QB **Brett Favre** happy, they also need him healthy. He has been rehabbing in Mississippi after having ankle surgery in February. Favre knows his legs will go before his arm does, so he's working with a trainer on flexibility and core exercises to help him stay mobile. ... Rookie **Kevin Boss** is the favorite to be the **GIANTS'** backup tight end, but don't count out **Darcy Johnson**, who matched Boss catch for catch at a



TOM HAUCK FOR SN

YOUTH MOVEMENT

Rookie DE **Jamaal Anderson** showed at **FALCONS** minicamp that he's going to give offensive tackles a lot of trouble. He's big, fast and agile. Once he learns how to use his hands and switch momentum at top speed, he will be a big-time pass rusher. ... Versatile **PANTHERS** rookie **Dante Rosario** is a strong blocker who could take some burden off FB **Brad Hoover**, who has endured a lot of wear and tear. Rosario also can play the role of the blocking tight end, freeing **Michael Gaines** and **Jeff King** to focus more on receiving. Rosario has receiving skills that could be put to use at either position. ... The **CARDINALS'** **Darryl Blackstock** hasn't done much in his two NFL seasons, but that could change. Blackstock remains a backup at outside linebacker, but he also is getting a look as a rush end in nickel situations—a role he likes. He has gained weight and is up to about 255, and he has the quickness to be an effective situational rusher. ... The **BEARS** are moving CB **Devin Hester** to offense. The plan is for him to get time as a slot receiver and perhaps in the backfield, where he would be used in a similar way to how the Saints deployed **Reggie Bush** last season. Coordinator **Ron Turner** is expected to develop a package of plays designed to get Hester in the open field and create mismatches with linebackers and safeties. Considering the impact Hester had as a return man last season, this move was a no-brainer.



BOB LEVERONE / SN

recent minicamp and showed a surprising burst. Johnson must improve as a blocker, an important part of the No. 2 role. ... **RAMS** backup DT **Claude Wroten** has the quickness and athleticism to provide a push inside, but those abilities didn't often translate into production as a rookie. The Rams hope that will change now that he has a better grasp of the defense. If Wroten improves, that would allow the team to lean less on DT **La'Roi Glover**, who turns 33 in July.

Arizona's game plan: keeping its quarterback conscious.

New offense is the best prescription for Tuitama

By Matt Hayes

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Willie Tuitama was watching cut-ups of the new offense in the film room last December when his new coordinator laid it on the line. "I told him if he's getting hit in this offense," Sonny Dykes says, "it's his fault."

In other words, Tuitama's days as the Pac-10's punching bag are over. It has been two years since Tuitama signed with Arizona as one of the nation's top high school quarterbacks. He has it all: a strong arm, a ton of athletic ability and the charisma to lead a team to big things. But there's one tiny problem: He gets pummeled every time he takes a snap.

But this new offense at Arizona—this wide-open, pass-happy scheme Dykes learned from Texas Tech coach Mike Leach and brought to Tucson—will, as strange as it sounds, prevent Tuitama from another season of hard knocks and return Arizona to college football's post-season.

Arizona has averaged a finish of 100th—100th—in the nation in total offense in three years under Mike Stoops. The Texas Tech offense, meanwhile, has been one of the most prolific around. Here's another interesting little fact about the Tech offense: In the past seven years, no quarterback has missed a start because of injury.

Then you have Tuitama, who can't stay healthy because Arizona can't seem to protect



Tuitama, in a rare moment last season when he wasn't being flattened by a defender.

him. In two seasons, Tuitama has played with ankle, rib and shoulder injuries. Yet those are mere annoyances compared with the real issue: concussions.

Last season, Tuitama suffered four head-dizzying hits in three months, and he recently flew to Pittsburgh for a series of neurological tests to determine the extent of the damage.

speedread

How pathetic is Duke football? The school is considering moving a home game against Alabama to a neutral site (Atlanta) and making some dough in the process. So instead of 32,000 Tide fans in 34,000-seat Wallace Wade Stadium, there will be 69,000 Tide fans in the 71,000-seat Georgia Dome.

Fortunately, there was little.

Dykes is one of the brightest young teachers of the passing game. His shotgun scheme is based on timing, quick recognition and short to intermediate throws. It revolves around the mental connection between quarterback and receiver and their ability to read defenses and change routes at the line of scrimmage.

But that doesn't mean the Arizona line—which has given up 52 sacks the past two seasons—won't have to get better. Because of the team's speed at wide receiver and Tuitama's ability to throw deep with accuracy, there will still be downfield throws in this controlled offense.

If, that is, the protection holds up.

"I can't blame Willie for being a little gun-shy," Dykes says. "But that's not going to be a problem anymore."

To Wildcats fans, more soothing words couldn't have been said. **SN**

S Which teams will have to travel the toughest roads in 2007? Tom Dienhart rates BCS team schedules at sportingnews.com.

The significance of Nebraska's getting an oral commitment from QB **Blaine Gabbert** can't be overstated. He is among the nation's top three pro-style quarterback recruits, with many comparing him to Georgia's **Matthew Stafford**. After a couple of high-profile problems with elite prep quarterbacks, coach **Bill Callahan** must find a way to keep Gabbert in the fold. Callahan's first big high school quarterback recruit, **Harrison Beck**, transferred to N.C. State, and his second, **Josh Freeman**, backed off a commitment and signed with Kansas State. ➤ Don't put much stock in Kansas coach **Mark Mangino's** decision to keep the quarterback job open

INSIDE DISH

until fall camp. On talent alone, **Kerry Meier** clearly is the team's best quarterback, but he must learn to eliminate mistakes. He has forced throws and has had ball security issues. ➤ Oregon coach **Mike Bellotti** wants to keep much of the spread offense installed by former coordinator **Gary Crowton**, who now is at LSU. But new coordinator **Chip Kelly** has added a few wrinkles—including some no-huddle sets to take advantage of

QB **Dennis Dixon's** athleticism. Kelly ran a similar offense at Division I-AA New Hampshire last year, where QB **Ricky Santos** accounted for 3,509 yards of total offense and 41 touchdowns.

Six or seven years of high school may be absurd, but so is the NCAA.

A blown call that needs to be reversed

By Mike DeCourcy

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My introduction to the concept of ex post facto law came in ninth-grade history. So I know the Ph.D.s on the NCAA board of directors, who have been around higher education for decades, understand the Latin phrase. And they know if they were a government body passing retroactive legislation, they would be in violation of the U.S. Constitution.

They've got no such problems, though.

They run the NCAA. They can do as they please.

Last month, the board approved a new bylaw restricting athletes who attend prep school for a "fifth year" to earning just one credit toward the 14, soon to be 16, required for Division I freshman eligibility. The rule is effective immediately, which means current prep school underclassmen or those planning to attend prep school could be out of luck.

For the past year, the NCAA has attacked "diploma mills" by investigating prep schools and announcing it will not accept credits toward athletic eligibility from those deemed to be insufficient. This has been a worthwhile effort, but it affronted several esteemed prep schools—and this legislation exacerbates the injury.

The South Kent School in Connecticut has been around since 1923, so it's not some instant hoops factory manufacturing grades for D-I prospects. Coach Raphael Chillioux has simple solutions to the current issues. He suggests any rule—even if it's the one-credit allowance—be implemented gradually so no one is punished for doing what wasn't against the rules at the time. His second recommendation for a change: "No one can do six years of high school. ... I think that would make a lot more people happy."

NCAA officials say they passed the one-credit rule because they didn't like that students were deliberately failing classes in order to not graduate

speedread

Patrick Patterson, a top class of 2007 prospect, and his family spent six months studying the programs at six different colleges and getting to know their coaches, teams and strategies. Then he signed at Kentucky—where new coach Billy Gillispie had been hired about six weeks earlier. Love at first sight, apparently.

from high school so they could finish diploma work at a prep school. But that's disingenuous because NCAA regulations led those students to flunk purposefully in the first place: Graduating high school without meeting minimum NCAA standards for grade average or SAT scores means an athlete's academic record is frozen and he can't use a prep school year to work toward eligibility.

There still is time for the NCAA to reconsider the one-credit rule. If enough schools object before late June, there can be an override vote or suspension of the legislation.

If it stays in place, more college coaches will direct younger prospects—in ninth or 10th grade—to leave home

and attend prep schools better equipped to educate them toward NCAA eligibility. Another possibility is an epidemic of players' being held back in eighth grade.

The National Association of Basketball Coaches board met with NCAA officials earlier this month to discuss concerns about this and other new rules. They were told current prep school students trapped by the one-credit rule would be eligible for waivers and that the NCAA would be lenient in these cases.

Why should the student have to sweat that appeal for a year, though? The NCAA board should rescind this piece of bad legislation and offer a *mea culpa*.

That's Latin for "We really screwed up this one." **SN**



Prep school helped get Paul Harris ready for Syracuse, but new NCAA regulations will limit the options for future athletes and could result in a junior college boom.

INSIDE DISH

Syracuse's decision to anoint assistant **Mike Hopkins** as coach **Jim Boeheim**'s eventual successor has been in the works for two seasons, and the program's outstanding recent recruits had an idea it was coming. Most probably will play their entire careers for Boeheim, though; he does not appear eager to give up coaching. ➤ Wisconsin lost 33.2 points per game when **F Alando Tucker** and **G Kammron Taylor** finished their careers, and its top returning scorer, **F/C Brian Butch** (8.8 ppg), isn't expected to make a huge jump in that department. The Badgers figure he'll be good for 10 to 12 points and are hoping someone else—possibly **F Marcus Landry**—can become an effective first option. ➤ Alabama PG **Ronald Steele** had surgery on both knees in early April and probably won't be ready for full-court activity until late June or early July. His right knee was more severely injured, so the rehab for that leg has been more intense. Before he got hurt, Steele was the college game's best playmaker and an NBA prospect. ➤ Both of South Carolina's transfer guards, **Devan Downey** (Cincinnati) and **Zam Frederick** (Georgia Tech) played point at their previous stops. Now, Downey will run the Gamecocks' attack and Frederick will play off the ball. A natural shooting guard, Frederick played point out of necessity at Tech; that experience will allow him to spell Downey when necessary.

BILL KOSTROUN / AP

★ ★ **Front Impact Rating**

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MATT SLOCUM / AP

EXPOSURE

Hit and run

Never mind the V-dub's front impact rating, does Gary Matthews have collision insurance? Brad Wilkerson's homer took the Angels' center fielder into the wall, but the solo shot barely put a dent in first-place L.A.'s lead in a 7-2 victory over the Rangers.

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